What your Community Can Do to End its Drop-Out Crisis:

Learnings from Research and Practice

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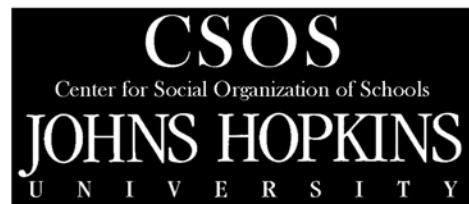
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A Call to Action

Many communities in the United States face a silent epidemic-year after year, one third to half or more of the primarily low-income and minority students they educate in their public school systems fail to graduate from high school (www.civicenterprises.net)   Decades ago, this would not have been a crisis. Factory jobs provided an avenue for employment and upward mobility for young adults without high school degrees. Today, the unemployment rate for young adults without a high school diploma is staggering. As a result, failure to graduate from high school has become a ticket to the underclass. For a single individual this can be tragic, but when the majority or near majority of students from entire neighborhoods and communities fail to graduate, the social and economic costs are profound and far reaching.

It does not have to be this way. We know enough about who dropouts are, why they drop out and how to prevent it to help communities confront and stop their dropout crisis. Over a decade's worth of research, development and direct action confronting the dropout crisis indicates that, while it will not be easy, quick or cost-free, this is a crisis that can alleviated by a combination of effort and policy (www.all4ed.org, www.jff.org). Moreover, it is worth doing. Pick your issue – improving the economic vitality of your community, cutting its crime rate, reducing its social welfare costs, expanding its middle class, reducing concentrated poverty, or achieving social justice - stopping the dropout crisis in your community is a means to achieve it.

The following is offered as roadmap or practical advice on how to begin. Like all advice it should be taken with a grain of salt. Each community is different and I can only report on what I have read and learned, so this knowledge and experience must be integrated with local facts and the characteristics of each community. The advice is based on what is known at the national level about the nature of the dropout crisis and how it can be prevented (www.gradgap.org), experience over the past decade working with middle and high schools that serve low-income students in more than 30 communities to implement the Talent Development Middle and High School whole school reform models (www.csos.jhu.edu) , and operation of the Baltimore Talent Development High School, an Innovation High School in the heart of one of the highest poverty neighborhoods in America (www.btdhs.org) .

A Three Step Plan for Ending the Dropout Crisis in Your Community

There are three essential steps to ending the dropout crisis in our communities. First, your community needs to understand its dropout crisis and the resources it is currently devoting to ending it. Second, your community needs to develop a strategic dropout prevention, intervention and recovery plan that focuses community resources, efforts and reforms at the key points where and when students fall off the path to high school graduation. Finally, your community will need to gather the human and financial resources needed for a comprehensive and sustained campaign and develop the evaluation, accountability and continuous improvement mechanisms needed to maintain it.

Step 1-Understand the Dropout Crisis in Your Community

Who Drops Out in our Community?

The most basic questions that need to be answered are how many students drop out, how far from graduation are they when they drop out (what percent of dropouts are relatively close to graduation-within a year or so and what percent are far away –still in need of three to four years of secondary schooling) and from which schools do they drop out?   There is an almost dizzying array of dropout statistics available but the one you need is what percent of students who enter ninth grade (or the first year of high school) for the first time graduate on time, as well as one or two years after their expected graduation date.

These questions need to be approached in two ways. The community and school district should invest the time and resources necessary to retrospectively trace the path of several groups of students as they progress through the school district from the sixth grade to graduation or dropping out. This is the best way for the community to get a firm understanding of how far students are from graduation when they drop out. It also shows factors that can predict who will drop out and will provide a baseline from which to judge the impact of reforms. Nearly all school districts have the data needed to do this, but depending on how the data is organized it can be a labor-intensive process. So in many cases it may be necessary to involve university researchers or provide the school district with additional funding to hire the necessary personnel. In the end, though, this analysis will require only modest investments in time and dollars and bring large dividends. Recently Boston, New York and Philadelphia have undertaken these efforts and can serve as good models and resources for other communities (http://www.projectuturn.net).

In the meantime, communities can launch their efforts to end the dropout crisis by using readily available data to produce reasonable estimates of the extent and location of their dropout crisis. The data provided by the EPE Research Center provides estimates of the graduation rate in each school district in the United States (http://www2.edweek.org/rc/index.html). It also shows at which points in the high school years students are being lost. Data available at the Alliance for Excellence in Education website (www.all4ed.org) allows communities to go one step further and pinpoint the high schools with the highest and lowest graduation rates. Finally, estimates on how far high school dropouts are from graduation can be gleaned by examining a random sample of the high school transcripts of students who have stopped attending high school in the current year. These estimates will be sufficient to help launch community efforts, but it is essential for long-term success that the more complete data analysis be done.

Why do Students in our Community Dropout?

Knowing how many students are dropping out, how far from graduation they are, and from which schools they are dropping out is only the first piece of knowledge needed. It is also essential to gain an understanding of the source of the dropout crisis in your community. Research and experience indicates that there are four broad classes of dropouts.

1) **Life events**- students who dropout because of something that happens outside of school -- they become pregnant, get arrested or have to go to work to support members of their family.

2) **Fade Outs**-students who have generally been promoted on time from grade to grade and may even have above grade level skills but at some point become frustrated or bored and stop seeing the reason for coming to school. Once they reach the legal dropout age they leave, convinced that they can find their way without a high school diploma or that a GED will serve them just as well.

3) **Push Outs**-students who are or are perceived to be difficult, dangerous or detrimental to the success of the school and are subtly or not so subtly encouraged to withdraw from the school, transfer to another school or are simply dropped from the rolls if they fail too many courses or miss too many days of school and are past (or in some cases not even past) the legal dropout age.

4) **Failing to Succeed**- students who fail to succeed in school and attend schools that fail to provide them with the environments and supports they need to succeed. For some, initial failure is the result of poor academic preparation, for others it is rooted in unmet social-emotional needs. Few students drop out after their initial experience with school failure. In fact, most persist for years, only dropping out after they fall so far behind that success seems impossible or they are worn down by repeated failure. In the meantime, they are literally waving their hands saying "help" through poor attendance, acting out and/or course failure.

Communities need a good estimate of how much of their dropout crisis is driven by each type of dropout, as each requires substantially different prevention, intervention and recovery actions. In my experience, the popular viewpoint is that "life events," "fade outs" and "push outs" predominate, when in fact "failing to succeed" students often are the main source of dropouts. But because each community is different, it is important to get a clear sense of the relative magnitude of each type of dropout. This can be done with a survey, some interviews and a more detailed version of the group analysis.

One way to get a sense of the forces propelling students out of school is to ask high school students to report the reasons they are absent. By and large this year's dropout is last year's truant, so asking students to report the number of school days they miss for various reasons provides insight into why students drop out. We have learned that when

the survey is anonymous students do not hesitate to provide answers even when they do not cast themselves in the best light. The survey results can then be used for follow-up interviews with a sub-set of students to delve more deeply into motives for dropping out.

Surveys and interviews provide important context, but without a careful analysis that follows groups of students forward from sixth grade and examines the attendance patterns, behavioral history (suspensions etc.), course grades, credit history and test scores of students who graduate and dropout, you can not truly understand the source of dropouts in your community. As importantly, the analysis enables you to develop "on-track" and "off-track" indicators that are critical in establishing an effective dropout prevention and intervention strategy. Good advice on how to do this can be found in an article by Craig Jerald on developing early indicator systems (http://www.jff.org/Documents/IdentifyingPotentialDropouts.pdf).

Once again, however, it is not necessary for this analysis to be completed before a community can begin to end its dropout crisis. This work can begin based on findings from other districts and then be refined as specific community details emerge. Work in Chicago, New York and Philadelphia has shown that both the majority of students who will drop out and who will graduate can be identified long before this occurs. Moreover, the critical indicators are based on data readily available in, and commonly collected by, schools and school districts.

Our own work in Philadelphia, which has been replicated in three other urban districts, shows that about half of eventual dropouts can be identified by the end of sixth grade, and close to 75% by the start of high school. In short, we have found that middle-grade students who fail their courses, attend school less then 85-90% of the time and are seen as having behavioral problems either via suspensions or poor behavior or effort marks seldom graduate. Work in Chicago has shown that the same is true for students who receive more than one F in a single ninth-grade marking period (http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/p78.pdf). These are the "failing to succeed" students. Through their course failure, poor attendance and behavioral problems they are in essence asking for help. But because our educational systems are not organized to recognize and respond to these early indicators of falling off the graduation track, "failing to succeed" students are too often ignored until it is too late.

Are Our Schools Organized to Reduce Dropouts or Do They Inadvertently Help Create Them?

The last question communities need to ask themselves about their dropout crisis is whether their schools are making it better or worse. The community needs to examine closely all the high schools from which the majority of students are dropping out and the middle schools that feed them. It needs to take a hard look at three tough issues.

First, are these schools over-challenged and under-resourced? For example, in some high-poverty non-selective neighborhood high schools there can be 400 or more students in the ninth grade with more than 80% of them either repeating for the second or third time, overage for grade, in special education, two or more years below grade level in mathematics and reading and/or having missed a month or more of eighth grade. In this case, only 1 in 5 students can be described as the typical student high schools were designed to educate -- students who are first time ninth-graders, on age, come to school regularly, are not in special education, and have math and reading skills on the seventh-grade level or higher. Four out of five students need substantial and sustained supports in order to succeed at all, let alone in a high-standards, high-stakes testing environment. A similar situation can be found in the sixth grade of a high-poverty middle school. Here you can have 25 sixth-graders with attendance problems, a different 25 with behavior problems and an additional 50 students failing either math or English, with each group needing different levels of different interventions (www.gradgap.org).

The high degree of educational challenge is only half the story. Far too often this huge challenge is met with an under-resourced response. Ninth grade, for example, is typically viewed as the least desirable teaching assignment in a high school, so more-experienced and often more-skilled teachers end up teaching the upper grades and the ninth grade is taught by a shifting constellation of new, inexperienced, emergency certified teachers and long-term subs. High-poverty middle grades schools are likewise, viewed as an undesirable teaching assignment with teachers leaving for either elementary or high schools at the first opportunity. As the Education Trust Funding Gaps 2006 report shows, these imbalances in experience and skill lead to both poor academic outcomes and great funding inequities across schools within districts (www.edtrust.org). So some of the tough questions a community needs to ask are "who is teaching the ninth grade in the high schools with the highest dropout rates" and "who is teaching in the middle schools that feed them" and "how does their skill, experience level, and stability compare to teachers in more successful schools in the district?" The community then needs to take another one step further and calculate the actual dollars being spent on instruction and student support in each school.

The third set of hard questions communities need to ask about their schools revolves around school climate and teaching and learning conditions. High schools with high dropout rates and the middle schools that feed students into them are often marked by high rates of teacher and administrator turnover and absences. This has multiple negative consequences. It is impossible to have meaningful and lasting reform if the teachers and administrators who need to carry it out are constantly shifting. High staff turnover also means that students are taught by high numbers of inexperienced teachers, provisionally certified teachers and long-term subs. Sometimes they can be taught by no one at all while administrators desperately search for a live body to put in front of the class. When many teachers are frequently absent it leads to the other adults in the building having to cover their classes, and in so doing, takes away the time and energy they have to do their jobs or lead reform efforts.

Communities need to look at teacher and administrator turnover rates and absences and attempt to understand their cause. Look for two things. First, a chaotic school climate with students milling in the halls long after the bell has rung and all the classroom doors shut tight. Talk to teachers, administrators and students. If the teachers say that the administration does not back them up when students act out; if administrators say teachers are not doing their job with classroom management; if students say they find some teachers caring, but others capricious and unfair, then you have likely found a school where teacher-administrator and teacher-student relationships have broken down. Everyone is blaming someone else and the collaboration and trust that is essential to successful school reform are non-existent (or only exist among a small beleaguered group of teachers/administrators). This creates a feeling that all teachers must fend for themselves as best they can. It leads some to conclude that the only thing they can do is leave as soon as possible and/or take off as many days as they can to make it through the year.

There is also a second more subtle school climate to be on the lookout for: the school that appears more or less orderly but where everything moves at a languid pace. Examine student lateness and attendance. Are many students straggling in 30 minutes or even an hour or more late? Do many classrooms appear just to have a handful of students in them?

The other type of ruinous school climate that can emerge is one in which low expectations dominate. The school is implicitly organized to do the minimum possible to get through the day without a major incident. Students know as long as they do not act out, not much is expected of them and they can pass without doing much work and come and go as they please. This environment, though less overtly stressful than a chaotic school, is similarly unappealing to many teachers who then leave as soon as they can.

In sum, the last piece of understanding the dimensions, location and characteristics of the dropout crisis in a community is to hold the high schools with high dropout rates and the middle schools that feed them up to a mirror. Has the community organized its public education system so a sub-set of its secondary schools face an almost overwhelming level of educational challenge? Has it further responded not by providing these schools with additional resources, but in fact by providing them fewer resources when teacher quality and the actual educational dollars spent at each secondary school are examined? Is it allowing these schools to continue year after year with dysfunctional school climates that are either chaotic or organized around low expectations and as a result witness a high rate of teacher and administrator turnover and absences? In short, has it created dropout factories?

Understanding the Dropout Crises in Your District

Questions	Method	Techniques

Who Drops Out?
1. How many dropouts?
2. When do they dropout?
3. How far are they from graduating?
	Use retrospective data to answer these questions for past cohorts	Track how past cohorts of students moving through middle and high school have done
		  a. Identify when students dropped out – how far from graduation
		  b. Develop dropout predictors
		  c. Create a dropout baseline

	Look at the current state of dropping out in the community	Examine existing data gathered by other organizations.
		  a. Education Week Resource Center: graduation rates in each district and by race and gender
		  b. Alliance for Education in Education: identify high schools with lowest graduation rate
		Review high school transcripts to determine at what point students drop out – how far from graduation.

Why Do Students Drop Out?	Determine the reasons:
	1. Life events
	2. Fade outs
	3. Push outs
	4. Failure to Succeed
		Anonymously survey truant students
		Follow-up interviews for more detailed data
		Use past cohort data to identify on-track vs. off track
		  graduation indicators.
		Use already existing indicators based on retrospective
		  studies done in similar districts.

Are Schools Organized to Reduce or Create Dropouts?
1. Are schools over-challenged?
2. Are schools under-resourced?
3. How great is turnover?
4. How is school climate?
	Survey, school observation and data analysis.	Challenges: Identify number and percent of
		  a. Repeat 9th graders
		  b. Overage for grade
		  c. Special education
		  d. 2 or more years below grade in English or math
		  e. Absent for more than a month
		
		Resources: Identify
		  a. If least experienced teach 9th and middle grades
		  b. Actual dollars spent per student in each school
		
		Turnover: Determine
		  a. Administrator turnover rates
		  b. Teacher turnover rates
		  c. Teacher absence rates
		  d. Teacher certification types
		  e. Use of long-term substitutes
		
		Climate:
		  a. Chaotic climate
		  1) Students in hallways instead of class, rowdy behavior with little attempt to foster better behavior
		  2) Teacher-administration conflict/finger pointing rather than cooperation
		  3) Teachers feel isolated and on their own
		  4) Students not feel teachers care
		  b. Low expectations climate
		  1) School orderly but little teaching and learning

		2) Classes start late, students straggle in
		3) Small numbers in each class

Step 2-Combine the Basics of Good Schooling with Focused Prevention, Intervention, and Recovery Efforts at the Key Points where Students Fall off the Path to Graduation

In order to stop the dropout crisis communities need to work to insure that two things occur in their schools. First, that all students receive the basics of good schooling—engaging, meaningful ,and challenging curriculum and instruction, delivered by well- trained and supported teachers, in serious and safe schools designed to provide students with the personalized attention they need to succeed in a high-standards learning environment. Communities, however, also need to realize that for schools in high-poverty neighborhoods this will not be enough. On top of the basics of good schooling a comprehensive dropout prevention, intervention and recovery system needs to be put in place and efforts need to be focused at the key points where students fall off the path to graduation.

Simply put, if students successfully make transitions into each level of schooling (elementary, middle, and high), they are significantly more likely to graduate from high school. Existing evidence shows that effective reforms at each of these transition points can increase graduation rates by about 10 percentage points. This, in turn, indicates that attention needs to be paid to all of them, as well as the transition to post-secondary schooling. Focused efforts at any one transition point, can make a difference, but existing research and experience tell us that it will not be enough to fundamentally end a community's dropout crisis. Existing research and experience also tell us that this will not be easy, but this does not mean it can not be done. Central to success will be viewing these efforts not as school reform but as a community campaign to end the dropout crisis.

But how can a community lead a campaign to reform its schools to end the dropout crisis? It can do so by making sure that reforms with records of success are in place at each transition and existing policies that evidence indicates are counter-productive to keeping students on the graduation track are abandoned and modified.

What follows is a simplified road map for each of the key transitions where students fall off the graduation path. This is meant to be illustrative, not definitive. Its goal is to provide one view on where and on what a community can focus its attention. For each transition there will be a key focus, some do's and some do not's.

You will notice an overriding theme. At each key transition point communities need to pay attention to insuring that all students have the academic/cognitive skills, social-emotional supports and behavioral expectations they need to succeed in each level of schooling. This is because most students who dropout do so for a combination of academic and social-emotional reasons. And it recognizes that even the best instruction in the world will have limited impact if students do not attend school on a regular basis, try to succeed and behave.

The Transition into Elementary School

The primary goal at this level is to insure that all students have a successful start. This has three aspects. Students need to acquire the cognitive skills and knowledge that will let them successfully learn in school. They also need to be socialized into the norms and behaviors of schooling. The tricky part is that this has to be done in a joyful manner.

What is this saying? Our system of education in which a single adult instructs 20 to 30 students only functions if students are prepared to succeed in this type of learning situation. Students who are not prepared to succeed in it fall behind and ultimately dropout. If a student does not have the cognitive skills or knowledge to understand and successfully integrate the lesson a teacher is giving or know how to behave according to the expectations of the classroom, they will not learn at the expected rate. As a result, they will become frustrated, and just as significantly frustrate the adults in the school building. This in turn will lead to a number of often counter-productive responses including yelling at students, grade retention and special education placement.

The importance of a successful start is well recognized. What is too often overlooked, however, is that a successful start involves more than just skills and socialization. It involves instilling in students that learning is a joyful experience and schools can be a place of joy. Why is this important to preventing dropouts? It's important because if students' first experience with schooling is that it is a place of tension, rules, and constraint but no joy, they will view it as something to be endured not cherished. The question then becomes, why endure? Without strong countervailing pressure from their parents or peers that schooling may not be engaging but it's necessary, some students will be on the path to dropping out from the very start.

Every Student a Successful Early Reader

Nothing is more essential to success in school than being able to read well. Communities must insure that everything humanly possible and then some is done to insure that all students are both reading at appropriate levels by second grade and are on track to make a successful transition to the more complex reading skills needed for the upper elementary grades
(http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/nrp/upload/report_pdf.pdf).

How is this done? First, make sure that high quality pre-k programs are available for all who need or want them. Second, establish a series of reading benchmarks. When students do not meet these benchmarks, have a tiered response with increased intensity of instruction until success is achieved. In other words, keep decreasing the student-teacher ratio, varying instructional techniques and/or increasing the time spent on instruction until the struggling child has learned to read well. Ultimately some children will need one-on-one instruction to learn how to read and those who need it must be provided this support. The upfront cost will be repaid through fewer grade retentions and special education placements. But effective one-on-one instruction can be difficult for school

systems to organize and sustain, so it should be reserved for the students who absolutely need it. This means that intermediate responses between traditional reading groups and one-on-one instruction will also be needed. One possibility to keep in mind is family literacy programs in which parents are taught how to play an active role in developing their children's reading skills. A struggling early reader may have younger siblings who can benefit as well (http://www.famlit.org). This can be an area in which community groups can play a critical role.

Socialize Students into the Norms of Schooling in a Joyful Manner

Students who live in high-poverty environments can experience high levels of uncertainty and stress in their lives. This can cause young students to either withdraw or act out. School must be an antidote to this. Young students need to see that learning is exciting and that school is a place where they are cared for. They need to feel secure. At the same time they need to be successfully socialized into the expected norms of activity and behavior in schools-everything from raising hands to taking turns to working quietly.

What this means in practical terms is that the early years of schooling need to be full of singing and dancing, art activities, and science projects-experiences that enable students to experience success, the joy of learning and provide them important content knowledge about the world. At the same time class size reduction needs to be used strategically and combined with positive behavior supports and evidence-based interventions like the good behavior game to create the conditions needed for all students to successfully learn the behavioral norms of schooling (http://www.evidencebasedprograms.org).

You might ask what class size has to do with behavior. Quite a bit as it turns out. While it is often assumed that reduced class size leads to more student attention and different instructional approaches (which it can), some evidence suggests that one of the key reasons class size reduction seems to have a bigger impact in the early grades relates to behavior. Think of it this way. We routinely instruction hundreds of college students at a time in large lecture halls but we would never think of educating hundreds of pre-school students like this. Why? Because they would not behave in a productive manner. Even if by some magic we could keep them all quiet, they still would not focus on the lecture and take notes. Students need to be taught the behaviors of school and if classes are large in the early years this becomes difficult to do, even with good positive behavior techniques.

With larger classes there will be more students per class who need extra attention and support to learn the behaviors of school. If there are too many of these students, teachers become overwhelmed and begin to feel that these students are holding the rest of the class back. At this point, counter-productive reactions like expulsion or special education placement can become the norm, so using class size reductions wisely is a key dropout prevention strategy. Evidence shows that smaller class sizes in the K-3 can lead to a 10% reduction in the dropout rate, particularly in high-poverty areas.   Each

community, however, will be different and class size reduction is expensive so schools need to be able to experiment with different class size configurations until a happy medium is found which balances cost vs. impact.

Do Not Expel Primary Students.

This may seem far-fetched but it appears to be a growing phenomenon (http://www.fcd-us.org/usr_doc/ExpulsionCompleteReport.pdf). Giving up on a 5-, 6- or 7-year-old child is not a productive solution for anyone. Expelling primary school students should be viewed as total system failure and additional skilled adults should be provided to the classrooms where this is occurring to provide both the students and the teachers the supports they need to succeed.

Do Not Use Special Education as the First Resort for Students Who are not Succeeding Behaviorally or Academically

Special Education serves an important function but assigning too many students to special education is counter-productive (http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007043.pdf). Special education with its individual education plans (IEPs) may seem like an effective support for struggling students. There is an inherent contradiction to special education, however, which limits its effectiveness. The special education services required by an individual education plan must, in the main, be delivered within a system of mass education. If there are two or three students in a class with IEPs teachers can with the support of special educators make accommodations. But when there are five, seven or ten students with IEPs, each pulling the teacher in different directions this becomes nearly impossible.   The result is that IEPs are not fully implemented and alternative strategies not attempted because it is assumed that the IEPs preclude it. The students ultimately become no one's responsibility and fall through the cracks. In short, there is tipping point where special education fails to achieve its stated goals. As such, it should be seen more as strategic tool for students with clear needs that can be successfully addressed through its supports, rather than a hope and prayer when nothing else seems to be working.

Do Not Forget About Mathematics

As important as reading is, it should not dominate early schooling to such an extent that mathematics is ignored. Recent research has shown that much of young children's free play has a mathematical component. In addition, we have learned that nearly all children, including children from high-poverty neighborhoods, enter kindergarten with the basic building blocks of mathematics — being able to count to 10 and recognize the basic shapes in place (http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000070.pdf). In short, all young children have mathematical interests and aptitudes. These need to be developed in a serious but playful manner beginning in pre-school. A number of good early mathematics programs has been developed in recent years with support from the National Science Foundation. Absent good early mathematical instruction which builds upon children's pre-existing knowledge and interests, substantial mathematical gaps will emerge during the early elementary years and by the middle grades become a major

factor in pushing students off the path to graduation. Because nearly all children enter school with the basic knowledge pre-requisites in place, mathematics has another positive attribute with regards to dropout prevention-it is an area where nearly all students can experience early academic success. This can serve as an important protective factor for students who are struggling to learn how to read, as their academic self-concept will not be dominated by these difficulties.

Transition to the Middle Grades

This is perhaps the most perilous transition. Students who make unsuccessful transitions to the middle grades, as evidenced by poor and declining attendance, behavior problems and/or course failure in the sixth grade rarely graduated in the four high - poverty cities we have examined in detail. This can be seen in the following table which shows the progression of first time sixth graders who fail math or English through a representative high-poverty urban school system.   For every 100 sixth graders who fail math or English only 11% percent graduated from the school system on time, and only 27% percent within two extra years

COURSE FAILURE: **All 96-97 6th graders that failed at least one math or English/reading course in 6th grade (n = 322)**
Of the 1716 non-graduates in the sample, 236 (13.75%) displayed this risk factor.

	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
6th	100	21	<1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
7th	0	77	30	3	1	<1	0	0	0	0
8th	0	1	63	30	8	0	<1	0	0	0
9th	0	<1	2	60	56	25	8	1	0	0
10th	0	0	0	1	22	28	13	6	<1	0
11th	0	0	0	0	1	22	18	7	3	0
12th	0	0	0	0	0	1	22	21	8	4
On-Time Grad	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	<1	1	11%	NA	NA
Grad+1	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	11%	NA
Grad+2	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	5%
missing from file	0	0	4	3	4	3	2	1	0	0
Dropped Out	NA	NA	2	3	9	20	37	52%	66%	70%

The middle grade transition is particularly tough because students in high poverty neighborhoods are experiencing multiple changes in their lives, at the very moment they are making an independent decision on whether or not to be engaged with schooling. They are facing the developmental changes associated with early adolescence. They are typically entering a new and often larger school, sometimes in a different and more distant neighborhood. The cognitive demands of schooling are becoming more complex.

In addition, they face a series of changes linked to life in high-poverty neighborhoods. They may face increasing responsibilities to care for younger siblings. They also may encounter more violence on the way to and from school, and may become targets of crime or be actively recruited into gangs or criminal enterprises. Finally, they may attend a school that has an overwhelming concentration of students in need and constant turnover of teachers and as a result is chaotic and disorganized. In short, the middle grades bring with it a constellation of forces which actively work to disengage students from schooling. As a result this is the moment when many students become lost (http://www.gradgap.org).

Thus the central focus of comprehensive dropout prevention program at the middle grades must be providing the supports needed for all students to come to school everyday, be engaged, and master the key intermediate academic skills needed for success in high school. Once again this has cognitive and social-emotional elements. On the instructional side, middle grade schools must provide an effective bridge to high school level skills. Too often in high poverty areas students acquire a good elementary education by the end of middle school, because middle schools are designed as an endless review of elementary skills. As a result, students lack the intermediate skills-strong reading comprehension and a good command of rational numbers, integers and proportionality, for instance, that they need for success in high standards high school courses. The middle grades curriculum needs to build year after year to measurable and intellectually meaningful outcomes in the 8th grade-the ability to write a persuasive essay and research paper, to read and interpret original documents from history, to conduct a science experiment and analyze its results, to use data analysis to uncover or solve a problem. These are the tasks that both engage middle grades students and demonstrate they are ready for success in high school.

This instructional focus needs to be paired with a communal organization of schooling that enables students to develop and maintain real bonds with their teachers. There are a range of techniques that can be used to achieve this -- inter-disciplinary teacher teams, teacher pairs in which each teacher teaches two subjects to the same students, looping in which teachers travel with students from grade to grade and small learning communities are a few. Each community can find a means which works best for it. A good guide to effective middle grade reforms Breaking Ranks in the Middle is available from the National Association of Secondary School Principals (http://www.principals.org). The key thing is to create an organization of schooling where teachers can focus their efforts on a manageable number of students and spend sufficient time with them for true bonds to develop. There is evidence that a communal organization of schooling, combined with strong instructional programs and effective extra help in the middle grades can increase graduation rates by 10 percentage points (www.csos.jhu.edu/tdms). This, however, is not enough. At least three other reforms or interventions may be required.

A Multi-Tiered Public Health Model Prevention, Intervention and Recovery System.

Middle grade schools must anticipate the many forces pulling students off the path to graduation and build a multi-tiered system of supports. First, there must be school-wide actions designed to prevent poor attendance, behavior and course failure. A student's first absence must be responded to, not their 10th. Good behavior needs to be modeled and rewarded, poor behavior consistently dealt with. At the first signs of academic trouble students must be given effective extra help. Then for students, for whom this is not enough, targeted small group or consistent but brief one on one interactions must be provided. These could be elective replacement extra help classes linked to students core courses, mentoring, anger management or grief counseling group sessions, or brief daily attendance check- ins by an adult. If this is not enough, intensive typically one on one or one to two or three interventions are called for-tutoring, counseling, social service support. Schools need to have clear rules on what triggers movement from one level of support to the next, and when students are ready to move back to less intensive supports. They may also benefit by partnering with external organizations like Communities in School (www.cisnet.org), which can help organize the integrated services students may need in the targeted and intensive support levels.

This sounds straightforward but few middle schools are organized along these lines. The ruling assumption is that the transition to adolescence and the middle grades can be rocky but hopefully students will "grow out of it." Research and experience in high-poverty environments is clear-students will not grow out of it. Absent significant and sustained interventions, the problems will get worse and multiply, and students will dropout. Below is a chart, based on work done by the Center for Social Organization of Schools at the Johns Hopkins University and the Philadelphia Education Fund (www.philaedfund.org) that gives an example of how secondary schools might organize a multi-tiered prevention and intervention system.

Comprehensive Plan for Keeping Secondary Students on the Graduation Track

Type of Intervention	Focus of intervention		
	Attendance	Behavior	Course Failures
School-Wide (All Students)	Every Absence Brings a Response Create Culture which says Attending Everyday Matters Positive Social Incentives for Good Attendance Data tracking at teacher team level	Teach, Model, Expect Good Behavior Positive Social Incentives and recognition for Good Behavior Advisory	Research Based Instructional Programs In-Classroom implementation support to enable active and engaging pedagogies
Targeted (15-20% of Students	2 or more unexcused absences in a month brings Brief Daily Check By an Adult Attendance Team Investigates and problem solves, why isn't student attending (teacher, counselor, administrator, parent)	2 or more office referrals brings involvement of Behavior Team Good behavior checklist brought from class to class checked each day by an adult Mentor assigned	Elective Replacement Extra Help Courses-tightly linked to core curriculum, preview upcoming lessons, fill in knowledge gaps Targeted Reduced Class Size for students whose failure is rooted in social-emotional issues
Intensive (5-10% of Students)	Sustained one on one attention and problem solving Bring in appropriate social service or community supports	In-depth Behavioral Assessment-why is student misbehaving Behavior contracts with family involvement Bring in appropriate	One on One Tutoring

		social service or community supports	

Organize the Middle Grades to Engage Students Sense of Adventure and Camaraderie

Middle grade schools need to be organized to engage middle grade students. They need to be strong enough in this regard to offset the multiple forces pulling middle grade students away from school. This does not mean they need to embrace popular culture or even electronic devices. Some of the most engaged middle grade students- across race, class and gender- are not playing video games, they are in robotics classes, on debate teams, playing chess or writing, directing, and performing plays. In other words, they are engaged in challenging intellectual activities that often involve teammates in shared pursuits or discoveries. The middle grades need to be filled with these activities, so schooling is the most exciting place students can be. They should be strategically placed at the end of the day so students know they have to attend school and behave to participate. Communities need to realize that many truant middle grade students are not roaming the streets; they are at friend's house playing X-Box® and Nintendo®.

Engage the Whole Community in Getting Middle Grade Students to School Everyday

In high-poverty neighborhoods the drop off in attendance between elementary and middle school can be staggering. The table below shows the percent of elementary and middle grade students missing 20 or more days of schooling by high-poverty neighborhood in a large northeastern city. In these neighborhoods, half or more of the middle grade students are missing at least a month of schooling, double and even triple the rate for elementary students.

Elementary and Middle Grade Attendance by Neighborhood

High Poverty Neighborhoods	Percent of Elementary Students (Grade1-5) Missing 20+ Days	Percent of Middle Grade Students Missing 20+ Days
Neighborhood 1	15%	46%
Neighborhood 2	15%	50%
Neighborhood 3	21%	65%
Neighborhood 4	6%	55%
Neighborhood 5	17%	57%

The entire community needs to be galvanized to do what it takes to get these 11, 12 and 13-year-olds to school. In part this may involve providing better transportation to school. In some urban areas middle grade students begin to take mass transportation to school. This can involve several stops and transfers and when it's raining or cold many students stay home. It also makes it very easy for students to head to friends' houses rather than to school.

This will involve improving child care options and facilities so 12-year-olds do not have to be drafted to watch younger siblings while parents go to work. This may involve faith based groups and other community organizations joining with teachers to be on-call to call students everyday they are absent, within 30 minutes of the start of school, to see what help they need getting to school. This may involve artful use of technology and linking teachers with laptops to parents with cell phones, so teachers with a click of the mouse can send out instant alerts to parents when students do not show up for school or cut out early. It is also a good place to involve national service organizations like Ameri-Corps and City Year (www.cityyear.org), which can help provide the necessary person power to support an all out effort

Transition to High School

If large numbers of students fall off the path to graduation in the middle grades, they crash during the early years of high school, in particular the ninth grade. Work by the Chicago Schools Consortium and others has shown that if students do not earn on-time promotion to the 10th grade, their odds of graduating greatly diminish. For many of these students, moreover, failure in ninth grade happens very quickly. They feel lost, scared or simply anonymous in large and often impersonal high schools. They may even miss 10 or more of the first 30 days of school, because they feel not much is going on, and no one reacts to their absences. What they do not fully appreciate is that for every quiz or assignment they miss zeroes are being recorded in grade books and when averaged with the Cs and Bs or even As they might get when they attend class the result is still an F. As a result they end up failing two or more first- quarter classes. This further signals that high school is not for them. Poor attendance and perhaps poor behavior and course failures continue and the students do not earn promotion to 10th grade. Most will attempt to repeat the 9th grade and absent additional supports will do no better. At this point they are considerably over-age and under-credited and their educational fate is set.

This is the dynamic the transition to high school must be organized to prevent. Here are some ways:

Transform the High Schools where Dropping Out is Common or Even the Norm into Strong Learning Institutions.

As long as a community has one or more high schools where the number of freshmen is nearly twice as large as the number of graduates, it will have a dropout crisis. Considerable early investment in keeping students on the path to graduation will be negated if students continue to attend high schools that are organized for failure rather than success. To turn this around communities must insure that their high schools which face high degrees of educational challenge combine evidence-based comprehensive school reforms with the human resources necessary to implement and sustain these reforms. Good guidance on how to do this exists. To find it here are some places to look.- the high school reform section of the MDRC website (www.mdrc.org), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (http://www.principals.org), and the education section of the Gates Foundation website (www.gatesfoundation.org/unitedstates/education/). There are also comprehensive whole school reform models with good evidence of success that can provide technical assistance including Talent Development, First Things First and America's Choice.

This existing evidence and experience demonstrate that to turn around high schools with low graduation rates comprehensive reforms will need to accomplish three key things. The reforms must provide instructional programs that can enable students who enter high school with below grade level skills to succeed in standards-based college prep high school courses, create teaching and learning environments that are serious, safe, personalized, and engaging, and provide teachers and administrators with the support and learning opportunities they need to implement, sustain, and develop effective reforms. It will also take time. Indications that the high school is on the right track should emerge quickly like increased attendance, course passing and grade promotion but substantial improvements in test scores and graduation rate may take three to five years. Find a high school reform attempt which has failed and odds are you will either find an effort which bet the ranch on one or at best two prongs of what needs to be three-pronged approach or abandoned its efforts before they had a chance to fully work. The second key point is that the details of high school reform matter. Too often I have seen districts embrace the big ideas of high school reform without having the personnel in place who understand how the mechanics of high school staffing and scheduling, for example, can fundamentally enable or doom reform efforts.

Do Whatever it Takes to Insure that All Students Earn On-time Promotion to the 10th Grade

Social promotion does not help anyone, but repeating 9th grade is more often than not a one-way ticket to dropping out. Earning on time promotion to 10th grade is the equivalent of being able to read by second grade. It's a point in time where everything possible and then some needs to be done to accomplish it. In practical terms this means many students will need a double dose of mathematics and reading/instruction in the 9th grade (80-90 minutes a day for the whole year) but part of this instruction will need to be geared to rapidly closing skill and knowledge gaps. Beyond this, some students will need targeted extra help which will involve reduced class size. A few will need tutors and these should be provided. For some this still might not be enough and summer school or

intensive first quarter courses of the following year will be needed to get them to full 10th grade status as rapidly as possible. In short, there needs to be relentless support. If one, two or even three levels of support are not enough then a fourth must be provided. It is critical that all these supports be integrated and aligned to directly provide the skills, knowledge and academic habits of mind students need to pass their courses and succeed on required assessments.

Recognize that There Are Both Academic and Social-emotional Components to Course Failure and Low Scores on Assessments.

Students fail in high school because they lack the necessary academic skills and knowledge to succeed. They also fail because they are afraid of failing and would rather be able to say they failed because they did not try hard than that they tried very hard and still failed. By the time they reach high school students are experts at finding coping mechanisms for academic struggles. Many of these coping mechanisms, however, are counter-productive and need to be addressed in order for the students to succeed. This is another place where targeted class size reduction can play a role. Students who continue to fail despite the provision of extra help may need classes as small as ten students so teachers are able to learn and understand their stories and the factors which stand in the way of success.

Make High School Relevant to Adulthood, Teach Adult Behaviors.

Just the early elementary grades need to be joyful, and the middle grades designed to fulfill early adolescents' need for adventure and camaraderie, the early years of high school need to be focused on building a bridge to adulthood. Many students in high poverty areas are compelled to grow up fast and assume adult responsibilities at an early age. They are not, however, given the time or supports to learn adult outlooks and behaviors like working for future goals and knowing what needs to be done to realize them. For example, there is emerging evidence that students need to earn at least B's in high school to have a good chance of succeeding in college. B or better indicates that students can do independent work of some quality. Yet too often, as Melissa Roderick and others have shown, there is a culture of passing in high school where the goal is to do enough to get by. One strategy that some high schools are using to impress upon students the need to do quality work to succeed in adulthood is to institute a B or better policy, where no major test or assignment is fully accepted until students have re-done it to earn a B. The final and initial grades are then averaged.

Beyond this, high schools have to actively structure their electives and the themes of the core course to stress the relevance of what is being learned to adult success. Career Academies are one way to do this, as are thematic academies which stress the Arts, Science or Public Service. Critical to success is that students make an informed choice that lets them align their studies with their interests.

It is also paramount that avenues for short term success through projects, performances and experiential learning be built in. If you enter high school significantly

below grade level it will require hard work and considerable time to produce quality high school work. In the meantime, students need to be experiencing success.

Involve Parents in Helping Students to Organize and Achieve Their Future.

In many ways high school is the most difficult time to achieve parental involvement yet it is vitally important.   In surveys we have taken students routinely say they work hardest for their parents. But they also state that their parents do not always know how they are doing. One strategy is to have twice a year mandatory parent-student-teacher report card and future planning conferences in which successes are celebrated, challenges identified, and solutions designed. As importantly, current school success or struggles needs to be continually linked to future outcomes and combined with post-secondary planning beginning in the 9th grade. Technology via conference calling should be used to accommodate parents work schedules. The national network of partnership schools has collected a treasure trove of good examples on how parental involvement can increased at the high school level (www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000)

The Final Transition-Multiple Pathways to Adult Success

Keeping students on the path to graduation through the transitions to elementary, middle, and high school leaves one more hurdle. Students need to receive a high school diploma that means something and be provided clear paths to post-secondary schooling and training. Effective recovery options also need to be provided for students who despite all of the supports provide or because of a life event or an ill-considered decision to dropout can have second chance to graduate.

Building multiple pathways to adult success is a good way to proceed. What does this mean? It means that all students should be provided a common college prep curriculum. There is emerging evidence that the same underlying academic skills that are needed for success in college are also needed for success in the workplace. But attending a four year college, while it should be a real option for all students, is not the only pathway to adult success. There are many rewarding and productive occupations which require two years of post-secondary schooling or training. High schools need to build direct linkages for students to these options through high quality career and technical education programs (CTE) and dual enrollment programs with community colleges.

High schools also need to collaborate with community colleges in creative manners to increase the number of ways students can achieve adult success. For students who are considerably overage and under-credited, we need to develop intensive and compressed schooling that provides more than a GED put does not tell a 17 year old that their only choice is three more years of high school and then two or more years of post-secondary schooling. One can also imagine a variation of the emerging early college movement, in which 6 to 14 campuses are created in our nation's most impoverished neighborhoods. These schools would take students at the cusp of adolescence when they are most at risk for falling off the path to graduation and provide them the option to graduate eight years later with an associate's degree educated and trained for rewarding

work or ready to transfer to a four year college. These schools might open at 8am and close at 8pm and be full of integrated and community school services.

Step 3-Organize a Sustained Community-Wide Campaign
To End the Dropout Crisis

In communities where dropping out is common, civic action will be needed to end the dropout crisis. The school system will not be able to do it on its own. The necessary civic action will have at least four components.

Create a Community-Wide Compact to End the Dropout Crisis

One reason why the dropout crisis persists is that often no one is ultimately the steward of the necessary reforms. Superintendents and principals come and go with such frequency and/or are distracted by the crisis of the year that there is no consistent oversight and management of the long-term action needed to end the dropout crisis. A strategic plan needs to be formulated at the community level, and then the permanent institutions of the community-its businesses, institutions of higher learning, civic groups, advocacy groups, police, hospitals, social service providers and neighborhood organizations-need to take ownership of it. In short, the civic enterprises which bear the costs of the dropout crisis need to create a compact with the school system. Superintendents and principals should be enabled, empowered and provided the resources to implement the community's strategic plan and be held accountable for doing so. New superintendents and principals should be hired with the expectation that they will continue to implement the plan. The Pew Partners for Change website provides several good resources on how to organize a community-wide compact to end the dropout crisis (www.pew-partnership.org) as does the "Silent Epidemic" website (http://www.silentepidemic.org).

Make Sure that the Necessary Resources Flow to Strategic Needs

Ending the dropout crisis in your community will likely involve both a reallocation of existing resources and the acquisition of additional resources. In order for these resources to be wisely used and the need for additional resources minimized it will be essential that dollars flow as efficiently as possible to where they will do the most good. Of course, this is much easier said than done. Here are some ways to get started.

School based budgets using real dollars — the first step in getting resources to needs is to understand how existing resources are currently being deployed and to examine the extent to which they are sufficient to support the needed reforms. In many communities, however, it is impossible to know how much is actually being spent in each school. This is because school district budgets are often calculated using average rather than actual salaries. School districts will report that they are spending $10,000 per student, for example, but in fact may be spending $5,000 per student at some schools, and $15,000 at some others. These differences in part may reflect spending priorities and decisions made years ago, which have over time become institutionalized. A fresh look is

required and the only way that can be done is by seeing what is actually being spent at each school and at the key transition points.

Get the Dollar Flows Right Between Education and Social Services — there is clear evidence that reducing dropouts will lower social service costs and increase tax revenues. Yet currently the relationship between educational and social service funding at the local, state, and national level is not organized to take advantage of this. This needs to be turned around. Local communities need to work at the state and federal level to get more social service dollars flowing towards dropout prevention work. The juvenile justice system, for example, should be investing in keeping adolescents on track to graduation by helping to fund mentoring, tutoring, and after-school programs for students who show signs of disengagement during the transitions to middle and high school (www.fightcrime.org). In our work in Philadelphia we found that two-thirds of the students who eventually became incarcerated during high school or had a child during adolescence were missing school, getting in trouble, or failing courses in the sixth grade. We also found that as late as eighth grade these students maintained high aspirations for school and career success. Consequently, targeted intervention to keep these students engaged in school would bring substantial social service returns. At the state or local level it might also be possible to use projected social service savings and increased tax revenues that result when students graduate prepared for college, career, and civic life to finance graduation bonds to generate the up-front capital that may be needed to help communities end their dropout crisis.

Support the formation of a federal-state-local partnership to transform the middle and high schools that produce most of the dropouts. Currently, there is pending federal legislation-the Graduation Promise Act-which would create the federal-state-local partnership and the accountability systems, technical assistance, capacity building, research, and resources needed to transform low-performing secondary schools. Communities need to encourage their elected representatives to pass and fully fund legislation like this, which will help provide the tools, oversight and resources needed for comprehensive secondary school reform. A good place to learn about federal legislation designed to help end the dropout crisis is Alliance for Excellence in Education website (www.all4ed.org).

Provide Human Resources

Additional human resources will be needed to end the dropout crisis in your community. In order for evidence-based interventions to succeed they need to be well implemented. Every major new intervention, whether it is at the district or school level, needs an intervention manager: someone to keep the people implementing it engaged and on task, to trouble shoot and customize it to local circumstances, and to improve it based upon implementation learnings. In theory this is supposed to be the school principal but school principals can only be in so many places, doing so many things at once. Here is a good place for community resources. Business and local institutions, as part of the community compact, could provide employees with nine-month leaves, to serve as implementation managers for key reforms (and perhaps the state and federal governments

could provide tax incentives to help defray the cost). This would provide schools with access to a larger pool of individuals with good management skills and provide the community with first-hand knowledge of how schools work and the challenges they face. These community implementation managers could work at both the school and school district levels. In many communities, school systems' research and budget offices have been hard hit by years of budget cuts, yet these are core functions required for a long-term community effort to end the dropout crisis.

Volunteer in Schools, Talk to Students, Teachers, and Dropouts

Lastly, to create the continuous feedback, monitoring, and learning loops that will be needed for long-term success it is important that the community know what is going on. The only way to do this is to be involved and informed.

This Can Be Done

The dropout crisis in your community can be stopped. The vast majority of dropouts do not want to leave high school without a diploma and even those who think they do quickly regret it. The challenge is not so much to convince students to stay in school, but to provide the continuous support they need to succeed in school. This can be accomplished by first developing a deep understanding of the nature of the dropout crisis in your community. The next step is to focus community efforts on building a comprehensive dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery system targeted at the key points when students fall off the path to graduation. Finally, the community must commit itself to a sustained campaign to end its dropout crisis and gather the financial and human resources it will need to succeed. One community alone can improve the lives of its citizens by ensuring that all its students graduate high school prepared for success in college, career and civic life. If all our communities work together to end this silent epidemic, we can profoundly change the nation for the better.

Twenty Questions to End the Dropout Crisis in Your Community

Step 1: Understand the Dropout Crisis in Your Community

1. How many students who start high school in your community fail to earn a high school diploma? How far from graduation are they when they drop out? From which high schools do they dropout? Which middle schools send students to high schools with low graduation rates?

2. What percent of your community's dropouts are "life events dropouts," "fade outs," "push outs" and "failing to succeed students?"

3. How early in their schooling can the majority of your community's dropouts be identified?

4. Are the schools in your community organized to help end the dropout crisis or do they inadvertently make it worse?

Step 2: Combine the Basics of Good Schooling with Focused Prevention, Intervention, and Recovery Efforts at the Key Points where Students Fall off the Path to Graduation

5. Does your community provide high-quality pre-k education to all young children who need or want it?

6. Does your community have reading benchmarks and provide multiple layers of support to insure all students can read by second grade?

7. Are your community's elementary schools joyful places filled with singing, dancing, art and science activities?

8. Is class size reduction used strategically, so elementary teachers are not overwhelmed and can take the time it takes to teach all students in a caring manner the behavioral norms of schooling?

9. Does your community not expel primary students nor over-identify students for special education services?

10. Does your community provide high quality pre-k to 2nd grade mathematics instruction?

Twenty Questions to End the Dropout Crisis in Your Community Cont.

11. Do you have a multi-tiered prevention and intervention system in place in your middle schools to react effectively to the first signs of poor attendance, behavior and course failure?

12. Are your middle schools organized to engage middle grade students and meet their need for adventure and camaraderie?

13. Is there a plan to transform high schools with low graduation rates into strong learning institutions? Is the plan sufficiently comprehensive? Does it have organizational, engagement, instructional, and teacher support components? Is implementation support being provided by someone who is experienced with high school reform?

14. Does your community do whatever it takes to insure that all students are earning on-time promotion to the 10th grade?

15. Are high school students being helped to make the transition to adulthood and adult behaviors?

16. Are parents being actively engaged to help high school students organize their future?

17. Does your school system provide multiple pathways to adult success?

Step 3: Organize a Sustained Community-Wide Campaign to End the Dropout Crisis

18. Is your community organizing a community compact to end the dropout crisis? Is it prepared for a sustained campaign?

19. Is your community working to insure that the resources being deployed to end the dropout crisis are being used strategically?

20. Has your community organized a means to increase the human resources available to help end the dropout crisis?

TALENT DEVELOPMENT MIDDLE GRADES PROGRAM

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