

A PROMISE WORTH KEEPING:

Advancing The High School Graduation Rate in Philadelphia



RESEARCH BRIEF | May 2015

Many crucial elements contributed to Project U-Turn's launch and eventual impact, none of them more consequential than the release of *Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis, 2000-2005*, the seminal and highly influential research report by Ruth Curran Neild and Robert Balfanz which was released in 2006. The report provided data on several cohorts of students over multiple years, examining their educational outcomes as well as predictors of graduation and dropout. Particularly important to the campaign's urgency, *Unfulfilled Promise* also revealed that only half of the cohorts of first-time ninth-graders slated to graduate from Philadelphia's public high schools with the classes of 2000-2005 had completed on time, and that over 30,000 young people from those classes left school without earning a high school diploma.

Project U-Turn and its partners have accomplished much over the last eight years. This report, *A Promise Worth Keeping: Advancing the High School Graduation Rate in Philadelphia*, takes a fresh look at the impacts of Philadelphia's collective strategy to increase graduation rates by examining recent cohort dropout and graduation rates. It also provides a nuanced view of those rates among high-risk students, including those involved in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, and those female students who gave birth prior to or during high school.



PROJECT U-TURN OVERVIEW

WHAT IS PROJECT U-TURN?

Project U-Turn, a campaign to resolve Philadelphia's dropout crisis, is led by a cross-sector collaborative with representation from the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), the Mayor's Office of Education (MOE), the city's Department of Human Services (DHS), family court, local foundations, and youth advocacy groups, as well as young people. The Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) is the backbone organization for the effort.

Project U-Turn partners have worked collectively over the last eight years to raise public awareness about the dropout issue, expand educational options for struggling students and youth who have left school without a diploma, support research and measure results,¹ and leverage funds to support these efforts.

Launched in October 2006, Project U-Turn galvanized public opinion across a broad range of constituencies and built a solid and committed base for action.

WHY WAS PROJECT U-TURN CREATED?

In 2006, despite slight increases over the years, Philadelphia's high school graduation rate (52 percent) was among the lowest in the nation. Project U-Turn was launched as a collaborative, citywide response to Philadelphia's dropout crisis by bringing attention to the problem, detailing specific solutions and assigning responsibility for implementing them, and committing to accountability through public progress reports. Research outlined in *Unfulfilled Promise* (2006), an in-depth report quantifying the scope and characteristics of the crisis, guided project partners in identifying needs, prioritizing program and policy options, setting measurable goals, and evaluating impact. Project-sponsored research, a committee of diverse stakeholders with interdisciplinary expertise, and broad-based input from the community, particularly young people, continue to inform Project U-Turn's work.

While its efforts are multifaceted, Project U-Turn has focused on reconnecting young people to a wider array of pathways leading to a secondary credential and postsecondary education or training.

WHAT SUCCESSES HAS PROJECT U-TURN EXPERIENCED?

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

- **Expanding high-quality educational options:** Project U-Turn works with and supports the School Reform Commission's efforts to expand the number of accelerated schools and increase high-quality options for off-track students and out-of-school youth.
- **Establishing a coordinated point of entry for re-engaging youth:** In May 2008, with support from Project U-Turn and the City of Philadelphia, SDP opened a Re-Engagement Center for youth seeking to return to education. The Center is a one-stop resource where former students can get information about the various educational options and be referred to programs that may meet their needs.
- **Preserving services:** In 2011 and 2014, Project U-Turn led advocacy efforts with local legislators and stakeholders to maintain support for Accelerated High Schools, when fiscal crises threatened their existence.
- **Improving Systems Coordination and Transition Services:** Project U-Turn collaborated with the juvenile justice system and SDP to change education policies and practices at delinquent placement facilities (for example, curriculum alignment, credit transfer rules, and career and technical education offerings) so that the academic and occupational coursework youth complete while in placement is more likely to be counted when students return to school district programming.

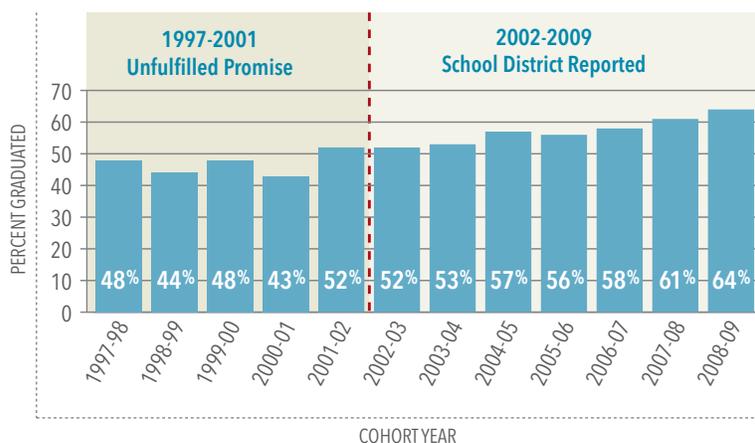
¹ See <http://www.projectturn.net/research.php> for research and reports generated since 2006.



- **Improving services for high-risk youth:** In 2009, DHS launched the Education Support Center to improve educational stability and outcomes for youth in DHS care, including children who are in foster care, receiving in-home services, or involved in the juvenile justice system.
- **Improving services for high-risk youth:** Project U-Turn worked with school district officials to align student maternity leave policies with the state’s guidelines and timelines so that teens can access child care subsidies when they return to school.

- **Using research to guide action:** Project U-Turn commissions and supports studies to assess the needs and realities of Philadelphia’s most vulnerable populations (many of whom participate in the aforementioned alternative education offerings) to inform program-based interventions and education policy decisions.
- **Mobilizing funding:** Since its launch, Project U-Turn has leveraged, aligned, and re-directed more than \$230 million in public and private funding to support dropout prevention and re-engagement, including \$103 million for the Student Success Center and SDP’s Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation for off-track students and out-of-school youth, and over \$7 million from private funders to support Project U-Turn’s policy and community engagement efforts. The lead private funder, William Penn Foundation, has continuously supported Project U-Turn’s efforts with more than \$5.5 million in total investments.

FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES OF 9TH-GRADE COHORTS



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

Since Project U-Turn’s inception, results include:

- The creation of thousands of new seats in high-quality, “multiple pathways” educational options for Philadelphia students
- The establishment of new access points to support enrollment and re-enrollment for at-risk students
- The redirection of millions of dollars in support of off-track students and out-of-school youth

Project U-Turn has produced steady declines in the high school dropout rate, and corresponding increases in the rates at which students graduate from high school, positioning Philadelphia as a national model for addressing the dropout crisis.

KEY FINDINGS

GRADUATION AND DROPOUT RATES FOR ALL STUDENTS

- The 2008–2009 cohort graduation rate reached a high of 64 percent, an increase of 12 percentage points from the previous report’s highest graduation rate.
- The four-year cohort dropout rate decreased from 29 percent in the 2003–2004 cohort to 25 percent in the 2008–2009 cohort.
- Graduation rates among all racial groups increased, with Hispanic and Asian students demonstrating the greatest gains. The greatest gains in graduation rates were made among Hispanic males and females (increasing 18 and 15 percentage points, respectively, between the 2002–2003 and 2008–2009 cohorts). Despite improvements, some disparities in graduation rates persist across racial groups.

GRADUATION AND DROPOUT RATES FOR HIGH-RISK STUDENTS

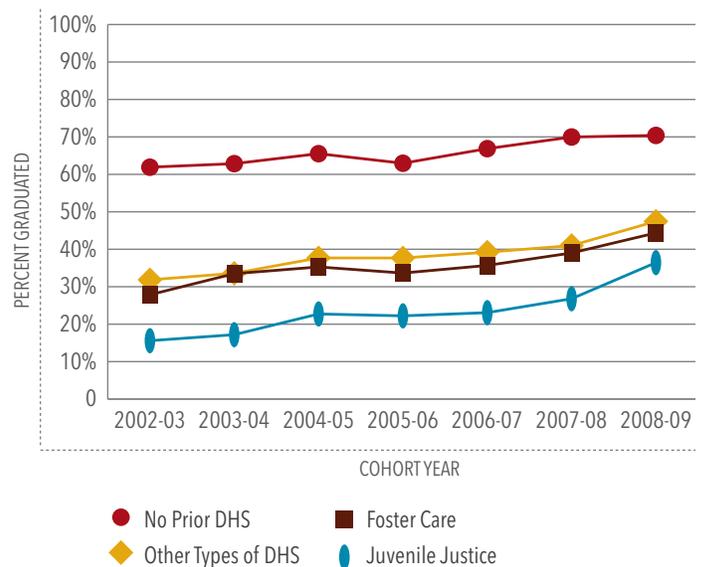
Over the study period, **DHS-involved youth** showed dramatic improvements in graduation across all levels of involvement with the child welfare system. For example, graduation rates for youth with:

- Foster care involvement increased from 28 percent in the 2002–2003 cohort to 44 percent in the 2008–2009 cohort.
- **Juvenile justice** involvement increased from a low of 16 percent in the 2002–2003 cohort to 36 percent in the 2008–2009 cohort.
- **Other types of DHS involvement** increased from 32 percent in the 2002–2003 cohort to 47 percent in the 2008–2009 cohort.
- However, despite these large gains for DHS-involved youth, their graduation rates continue to lag far behind those of their non DHS-involved counterparts.
- **Female students who experienced a birth** prior to or during high school **also saw graduation rate gains**, from 31 percent for the 2002–2003 cohort to 42 percent for the 2008–2009 cohort. Female students who did not experience a birth during this time demonstrated smaller gains in graduation rates (from 66 percent in the 2002–2003 cohort to 72 percent in the 2008–2009 cohort).

OTHER FINDINGS OF INTEREST

- The increasing graduation rates were preceded by improvements in factors associated with dropping out, including higher rates of on-time promotion from ninth to tenth grade, reductions in the percentage of students who were suspended or chronically absent in ninth grade.
- The percentage of dropouts who re-engaged rose steadily from 47 percent in the 2002–2003 cohort to 54 percent in the 2008–2009 cohort. The graduation rate for dropouts who re-engaged remained steady at roughly 35 percent across the seven cohorts observed.
- One in five students across all cohorts, and over half of all re-engaging dropouts, participated in at least one Project U-Turn program: GED to College, Educational Options Program, E³ Centers, Accelerated High School, Gateway to College, and Occupational Skills Training Program.
- While enrollment rates in two- or four-year post-secondary institutions remained relatively constant (between 36 percent and 38 percent across all cohorts), post-secondary enrollment for foster care-involved youth increased the most (from 17 percent to 24 percent) from the 2002–2003 to 2008–2009 cohorts.

FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATES BY LEVEL OF DHS INVOLVEMENT



THE ROAD AHEAD

WHAT'S NEXT?

Project U-Turn and its citywide partners have made important strides toward graduating Philadelphia's youth despite a challenging fiscal climate, leadership transitions, and policy shifts. Nevertheless, Philadelphia's on-time graduation rate (65 percent) remains significantly lower than state (84 percent) and national (80 percent) averages. This disparity shows a clear need for continued efforts to not only enhance, but also expand services and supports offered to both in- and out-of-school youth.

Based on key findings from our research, Project U-Turn has identified several next steps:

- **Continue the upward trend in on-time graduation rates** by focusing on increasing graduation rates for youth in the foster care and/or juvenile justice systems, youth who are pregnant and/or parenting, and African American and Latino males. Also boost persistence and graduation rates for Accelerated High School students by pursuing proven prevention strategies, such as Early Warning Indicators.
- **Increase the capacity and rigor of the School District of Philadelphia's multiple pathways options**, including adding high-quality seats in Accelerated High Schools and the Educational Options Program. Also establish performance targets and oversight to better identify high-performing programs and practices that can be replicated across the system, such as Jobs for the Future's Back on Track intervention model.
- **Improve the quality of multiple pathways options outside the School District of Philadelphia**— including E³ Centers, GED to College, and occupational skills programs— through greater collaboration with Philadelphia's workforce system as it implements the new Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.
- **Revitalize and expand Philadelphia's Re-Engagement Center**, providing resources for individualized support for students such as case management, counseling, an improved referral and follow-up process to better match students (especially those with multiple barriers) to programming, and other community-based supports suited to meet their academic, health, and social-emotional needs. The center will continue to collaborate and align with the work of the Philadelphia Department of Human Services' Education Support Center and Community Umbrella Agencies.
- **Increase students' exposure to post-secondary education and training opportunities** by expanding supports offered during the transition from high school to post-secondary education. Expansion will focus on education persistence, degree/certification attainment, work readiness, and employment placement through multiple strategies, including dual enrollment, mentoring, academic tutoring, and transition planning, with an emphasis on finding "best bet" options that fit students' interests and needs.
- **Educate and advocate at state and federal levels** to secure the adoption of workforce and education policies that promote dropout recovery and prevention.
- **Raise additional funds to support dropout recovery and prevention** through public, private and nonprofit sources.

We know that continued success requires robust collaboration and innovative approaches that are systemically aligned. Over the next several months, Project U-Turn will continue to galvanize its partners through the Philadelphia GradNation Summit with America's Promise Alliance and targeted discussions with collaborative members and key system partners to identify and set measurable benchmarks.

COLLABORATIVE MEMBERS

City of Philadelphia:

- Mayor's Office of Education
- Mayor's Commission on Literacy
- Department of Human Services
(Education Support Center, Delinquency Division)
- Philadelphia Housing Authority
- Philadelphia Youth Commission
- Philadelphia District Attorney's Office

School District of Philadelphia:

- Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation
- Office of Strategic Analytics
- Truancy Office
- Office of Early Childhood Education;

Center for Literacy

Community College of Philadelphia

Congreso

District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund

Philadelphia Education Fund

Public Citizens for Children and Youth

United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey

William Penn Foundation

YESPhilly

Youth Build Philadelphia Charter School

Youth Participant

Youth United for Change



To view the full report, learn more about Project U-Turn, and view a full list of collaborative members, please contact:

267-502-3800

www.projectUturn.net