

National Agenda for Graduating Every Child Prepared for the 21st Century

America's drop-out crisis erodes our country's capacity to be competitive in the 21st century. Our middle and high school students, particularly the more than six million who are most at-risk of academic failure, require a comprehensive, coordinated investment to ensure every student is prepared for high school and graduates with the skills and knowledge needed for success in college and the 21st century global workplace. We urge President-elect Obama to propose a comprehensive agenda that requires immediate action at the federal level to create, in cooperation with states and local school districts, a major initiative that would focus attention and resources at the middle and high school levels.

Support state and local systems of middle and high school improvement

Our middle level and high schools have historically been the forgotten stepchildren of federal school reform efforts and, for far too long, have not received an adequate share of funding and other resources from the federal government. But successful secondary school reform requires real coordinated strategies and significant resources for implementing systemic improvement and raising individual student and schoolwide performance levels. The federal government should support the development of statewide systems of differentiated school improvement that focuses research and evidence-based intervention on the lowest performing schools, and improves the capacity of these schools to increase student achievement and graduation rates. Improvement driven by data and designed for each school is critical to ensure students graduate prepared for success.

⇒ **Create support for turning around low-performing middle schools**

The middle grades provide students with critical transition support and preparation for the demanding coursework of the high school learning environment. Researchers have determined key factors that identify the students most likely to become dropouts as early as sixth grade, creating an opportunity to intervene and get them on track to success. Targeted funding to support middle school reform, especially for those middle schools feeding the dropout factories¹, is critical. (\$1 billion)

⇒ **Target new funding for turning around low-performing high schools**

Only 9 percent of the Title I funds that trigger interventions for low-performing schools under the No Child Left Behind Act make it to high school students. The result is little to no funding targeted to helping local educators turn around high schools needing the most help. Federal funds are needed to provide the support, technical assistance, and resources necessary to turn low-performing high schools around—strategies that include targeted interventions, whole school reform efforts or the development of new schools that meet the needs of underserved students. (\$2.5 billion)

Leverage higher standards and better assessments aligned to college and work readiness

No Child Left Behind set the goal that all students be proficient in reading and math by 2014, and requires annual improvement toward that goal. Unfortunately, state tests currently in use often measure tenth-grade proficiency, not college and work readiness. The most recent results for the 2008 ACT test found that only one in five high school graduates were prepared for entry level college courses, and a new report, *The Forgotten Middle*, finds that “fewer than two in ten eighth graders (are) on target to be ready for college-level work by the time they graduate from high school.” Current international comparisons of academic achievement show students in the United States at a deficit compared to students in many other nations. To be competitive in the 21st century workforce, students must graduate with the skills and knowledge to succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce. A comprehensive agenda should include incentives for states to work together to establish common standards and high quality assessments aligned to 21st century college and work readiness. We need fewer standards and ones that are clearer, more rigorous and internationally benchmarked. Incentives for states would support developing high quality assessments, aligning curriculum, providing professional development and other

teaching supports aimed at getting all middle level and high school students to a higher level of proficiency. (\$500 million)

Ensure students build literacy skills

A federal investment in reading must begin in the earliest grades and continue throughout high school. If children fall behind in grades K through 3 they rarely catch up and the consequences are devastating. Lack of basic skills at the end of middle school has serious implications for students. We know 70 percent of students enter ninth grade reading below grade level, significantly hampering their ability to succeed in high school courses and in life after graduation. A comprehensive preK-12 literacy policy would invest significant funding in the early, middle and high school grades, providing targeted interventions for struggling readers and enabling all teachers in the early grades to be literacy instructors and secondary school teachers to incorporate literacy skills across the curriculum. (\$1 billion)

Support research and innovation in middle and high schools

Middle and high schools must be redesigned to prepare every student for college, with rigorous and relevant coursework and with supportive relationships for all students. Without the opportunity to invest in new research, try innovative approaches to increase student achievement and graduation rates, and the ability to share best practices, the nation's middle and high school students will continue to be ill-prepared to succeed in the 21st century workforce. An innovation agenda that supports new approaches, evaluates their success and disseminates those that work to serve others is critical to reshaping America's middle and high schools. (\$500 million)

Invest in data systems and related professional development

Educators and policymakers recognize the value of information as an essential tool to improve practice. There is a critical need to invest in the collection, availability, and use of high-quality longitudinal student data to improve student achievement and outcomes. Absent these systems and staff trained to use them effectively, it is impossible to determine a true graduation rate, or disseminate other critical data points which include early warning indicators. These systems should meet the specifications of the widely-supported Data Quality Campaign. (\$150 million)

Ensure meaningful accountability for high schools, including graduation rates

Under current law, there is little to no accountability for high school graduation rates. As a result, adequate yearly progress (AYP) does not hold high schools accountable and, more importantly, the ability to identify and target assistance to low-performing high schools, is undermined. In fact, a high percentage of "dropout factories"⁽¹⁾ actually achieve AYP, despite graduating fewer than 60 percent of their ninth graders within four years. A comprehensive reform package must include graduation rates that are defined consistently, disaggregated by subgroup, and required to improve significantly over time as part of AYP for high schools. Also, AYP should equally weight proficiency measured by college- and work-readiness standards and graduation rates, and through that process, identify low-performing high schools so that they can be targeted for assistance.

Additional Elements that could complement this core package include:

- The use of technology for educational improvement. This includes increasing profession development for teachers in technology and encouraging research-based and innovative systemic school redesign centered on the use of technology. (\$1,000,000,000)
- Integrated services and comprehensive support in schools to children and their families to ensure that schools are the centers of communities. (\$260,000,000)
- Targeted assistance to high-need middle level and high schools that will increase the number of students from low-income families who attend college through support to teachers and school counselors to better advise students/families on academic requirements and financial aid options for postsecondary education.

Organizations Submitting this document:

Alliance for Excellent Education, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform and National Middle School Association.

¹ "Dropout factories" are the name given to high schools identified by researchers at Johns Hopkins University that have extremely weak promoting power; i.e., 60 percent or fewer seniors are enrolled than entered the school as freshmen four years earlier. Approximately 15 percent of America's high schools (about 2,000 schools) qualify as dropout factories by that definition. Although not a graduation rate, low promoting power may serve as an indicator that unacceptably large numbers of students are not making steady progress to graduation.