

TESTIMONY

TO: THE HOUSE EDUCATION AND LABOR COMMITTEE

PREVENTING DROPOUTS AND ENHANCING SCHOOL SAFETY



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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present the 26 year track record of success and some of the most important lessons we have learned about dropout prevention and recovery over that quarter of a century.

Let me commend the Committee, on behalf of our Chairman and your former colleague here in the House, Governor John Baldacci, for holding this hearing on a subject of such critical importance to the future of our nation as you consider the most important federal legislation impacting dropout prevention and dropout recovery strategies through the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind and other legislation later this year.

Very briefly, Jobs for America's Graduates is one of the nation's largest and, we believe, most successful, consistently applied, national models of dropout prevention and, more recently, dropout recovery.

Today JAG has a rare national "footprint", with operations in 30 states, serving well over 40,000 of our nation's most at-risk youth and impacting over 1,000 communities across our country.

JAG programs range from the inner-cities of Chicago, Atlanta, and Phoenix to the most rural parts of Eastern Montana, Northern New England, and a number of Native American Reservations and right here in our Nation's Capital.

JAG also has one of the longest track records and bases of experience of any dropout prevention and youth development program. We are completing our 27th full year, having served well over 500,000 high-risk youth in almost every socio-economic, geographic, and educational setting found in our country.

The results over a quarter century are both consistent and, we believe, compelling:

- A **93% return to school rate** while targeting high-risk, dropout prone youth.
- A **92.4 percent graduation rate** for the most recent cohort.
- An **80 percent overall success rate** at the close of the 12-month follow-up period after graduation, with graduates employed, pursuing a postsecondary education, and/or enlisted in the military.

In addition, over the past eight years we developed and are now rolling out nationally an application of our Model serving dropouts specifically in conjunction with community colleges. Nearly 5,000 young adults are enrolled in that application of the JAG Model.

LESSONS LEARNED

In the five minutes available, we thought it best to present to you some of the most important lessons learned over 26 years about what our experience and data suggests it takes to prevent dropouts, or to recover them:

1. **Improvements in curriculum and increased rigor are essential, but rarely sufficient** to prevent dropouts or improve overall academic achievement for at-risk youth.
2. To best ensure academic and economic success for at-risk youth, it is imperative to provide a fuller range of support and engagement which addresses **non-cognitive needs**.
3. **Engagement** is, perhaps, **the** most critical dimension of a sustainable strategy of dropout prevention and recovery. Everything works if young people are engaged, they are involved, they see hope, and they feel a sense of self esteem. Very little works if they do not.
4. Part of the engagement process is to ensure that the assets of the community are available to help overcome personal as well as academic barriers.
5. Engaging young people with positive, “real-world” experiences such as school- and community-based service-learning and career exploration motivates young people to stay engaged with school, achieve academically, pursue higher goals and define themselves as positive contributors to the community.
6. Offering engagement services where youth already congregate, such as school, makes it more likely that they will receive the support they need — and will be served by people who know them by name.
7. In the end, a fundamental ingredient to success is **having somebody who cares and who listens** - somebody who is responsible for providing consistent support and mentoring and held accountable for the individuals’ success.

8. In addition to the key ingredient of a caring adult who serves as a mentor and guide, the other needs which must be met include safe places, healthy starts, effective education and opportunities for service and civic engagement.
9. **Overall accountability** for success by the sponsoring organizations as well as for individuals who are entrusted with the educational and, in some cases, employment outcomes is another essential component.
10. **Work matters – a lot.** Part-time work at 20 hours or less per week is very favorable for both the long-term income **and** academic success for dropout prone youth. As another form of engagement, it makes school much more relevant and understandable.
11. Employer and community leader involvement in addition to education add important value to the sustainability of dropout prevention programs and rates of individual success.
12. Most importantly for your consideration: **We know** what to do to cut dropouts rates and recover dropouts – whether it is our 26 years of experience, or that of others, we **DO know** what is effective. What, as a nation, we have **not** been able to do is take those proven solutions to scale.

In short, there **are** proven solutions and methodologies for reducing dropouts, improving graduation rates, and ensuring transition to employment and further education for at-risk youth. With an emphasis on intensive engagement, clear accountability for educational success, work, and community involvement, we can reduce dropout rates **very** significantly – and we can do it now.

ENGAGEMENT

Time will not permit a full discussion on all of these conclusions. However, let me focus on that key issue of “engagement.”

Everything we have learned over 26 years serving over 500,000 high-risk youth indicates that **engagement** is a key to dropout prevention. In our case that includes:

- Intensive personal engagement by our staff member - the JAG teachers who are with our young people every day during school, and after school, during the summer and for weekend activities, and follow-up over the course of the year after they graduate and go to work or college. Our staff members are constantly engaging our young people in constructive and interesting job preparation, educational advancement, and self esteem building activities.
- The JAG model includes a highly motivational student organization, designed on the success of the vocational student organizations and Junior Achievement – but aimed

for these at-risk youth – is another key. 90% of our young people tell us they had never been invited to join any organization ever before. The chance to be part of a group, a team, and to be offered opportunities to lead are all extremely powerful means for school retention and success.

- Work is a vital form of engagement, we have found. That conclusion is backed up by recent research by the Center for Labor Market Studies. Work engagement enhances student achievement and success in school, especially for high-risk youth.
- Engagement in community service activities, in service learning, and in school activities are all part of our student organization activities' core engagement process.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION FOR THE REAUTHORIZATION OF NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

The recommendations we have are based on the experience I have discussed.

- Accountability for educational outcomes is at the core of what we have learned leads to results.
- Find ways to ensure high-risk youth in particular have serious and sustained opportunities for real engagement. Consider providing new opportunities for high-risk youth to be part of a positive student organization that reinforces educational success.
- Recognize the value of work as a part of the educational success strategy, especially for high-risk youth.
- Value the role of both the teachers and the role of the mentors – who may be the same, or a second individual.
- Encourage/incent scale for proven methodologies to accelerate improvements in outcomes.

Again, on behalf of Governor Baldacci and the Board of Directors of Jobs for America's Graduates, we very much appreciate this opportunity to share our 26 years of experience and would be more than pleased to answer any questions.