

Over time, the trend has been to consolidate, to close down smaller schools and put an ever-increasing number of students in fewer, but larger buildings. During the latter half of the last century, the percentage of secondary schools with more than 1,000 students went from 7 to 25 percent, and the population grew 70 percent, while the number of public schools declined by 69 percent.⁹

Since the mid 1990s, however, large-scale schools have come under attack for failing to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body at a time when the marketplace is demanding that more and more employees not only have a high school diploma, but a college degree, at a time when being an auto mechanic requires an understanding of complex computer systems, and being an electrician requires a higher level of math and problem solving skills than it did 20 years ago.

“The large, anonymous high schools don’t work for the most vulnerable kids,” says Constancia Warren, senior program officer and director of Carnegie Corporation of New York’s Urban High School Initiatives. “They may work for kids who can learn even if you lock them in the closet, kids for whom school is easy, who know they want to go to college. They can put up with boredom, and they can put up with teachers who don’t know them.” But many kids can’t or won’t, and they drop out.

Hence, Legters and Balfanz call large, comprehensive high schools “dropout factories.” The duo write in their report that reforming high schools should be an urgent national priority. Otherwise, the outlook for many youngsters is bleak and the all-American high school will only contribute to “a growing number of dispossessed young adults who are neither employed nor in school.”¹⁰

The premium placed on a high school diploma has evolved over time and for many reasons. Technology has been the driving force, but a pivotal moment came in 1944 with approval of the GI Bill, which made a college degree accessible to millions of American servicemen, while diminishing the value of a high school diploma.¹¹ In more recent years, labor unions have lost much of their influence and the minimum wage—measured in constant dollars—has dropped, leading to lower wages in general for less educated workers.

Today, someone with a high school diploma will earn on average \$25,900 a year, compared to \$18,900 for a dropout. The difference in lifetime earnings is \$200,000, and the gap widens to \$500,000 for someone who spent some time in college and to \$800,000 for someone with a bachelor’s degree, who will make an average of \$45,500 a year.¹² In short, dropouts will more than likely make little more than minimum wage their entire lives, while those with a diploma and/or a few years of college will fare slightly better, and those with a college degree will not only earn substantially more in their lifetime, but will also be less affected by the whims of the labor market.

Dropping out, experts say, is simply a disastrous decision. Dropouts are among the first to lose their jobs during an economic downturn, and during economic prosperity, they’re still destined for the low end of the wage scale. In addition, they are more likely to end up on welfare, to be arrested and go to jail. As Constancia Warren declares, “If we lose them now [in high school], we impose a terrible burden on their lives.”

In a gang-ridden neighborhood on the Northwest side of Chicago, principal Lourdes Lugo works diligently to spare at-risk youngsters the fate of a dropout’s existence. To do so, she reaches back to the days of one-

room schoolhouses that helped to cultivate a sense of community among the largely agrarian population they served. It's that sense of belonging that Lugo tries to recreate at the Pedro Albizu Campos High School, located on a stretch of Division Street bordered by large, artistic renditions of the Puerto Rican flag. The school shares a building with two other community organizations, dance classes are held at a dance studio next door and music classes are held in a room behind the barber shop less than a block away. "You keep going down the doors," Lugo notes, "and you find everyone is involved."

The school had 72 students in the 2003-2004 school year, 115 are enrolled for 2004-2005, and typically has a waiting list of more than 100. It also has a success rate of at least 95 percent for most students, and Lugo says that if she gets them as freshman, there's a 98 percent chance they will graduate.

DeShawn Samuels, 18, started his junior year at Pedro Albizu in the fall of 2004. He came to the school after he was expelled from Wells Community Academy High School, where he struggled academically, got into fights and skipped class. "When they kicked me out," he says, "they gave me a list of schools, and my mom had heard of this one." Samuels says he's much happier now than he was at Wells, one of Chicago's large comprehensive high schools with an enrollment of over 1,000 students. There, he says, "I was getting lost in the system. But now," he adds, "it's fun. It's like you want to do well. There's more encouragement."

On average, there are about 10 students in each of his classes, and Samuels says he likes the high standards imposed by the school, including a contract signed by each student, in which "you agree to follow the rules, and they reserve the right to kick you out without

explanation. . . . There's no room to play around," he notes, and says that's okay with him.

Pedro Albizu is one of 16 high schools that form part of the Alternative Schools Network. Formed in 1972, it channels funding to a total of 48 inner city schools and several community service organizations, and it lobbies relentlessly on behalf of the city's "disconnected" youth—those who are out of school and unemployed, like 16-year-old Mario Perez, who says he'd "start gang banging and getting into problems" if he hadn't found his way to the Pedro Albizu campus.

More than likely he would be one of the "disconnected" youth tracked by Andrew Sum, an economics professor at Northeastern University. The disconnected are those 16-to-24-year-olds who are not employed and not in school. Their numbers, which had been on the decline for much of the 1990s, started going back up in 2001, and reached 15.8 percent of the young adult population in 2003. Of the estimated 5.7 million disconnected youngsters that year, 43 percent were dropouts.

Also in 2003, the employment rate of those 16-to-19-year-olds was the lowest it had been since the federal government started keeping tabs at the end of World War II.¹³ For Sum, who believes "in the power of redemption through work," the numbers do not bode well for dropout rates. If school-age youngsters work more than 20 or 25 hours a week, it is counterproductive, he argues, but for those who work less than that, it tends to benefit both them and society as a whole.

Young people who don't work, Sum says, are less likely to see the connection between school and upward mobility, while those who do work often discover that flipping hamburgers, mowing lawns and painting

houses is not what they want to do for the rest of their lives, so they are more likely to finish school, to find a job after graduation and to earn more when they do graduate. Young adult women are also less likely to become teen mothers, and young adult men are less likely to end up in jail, according to Sum.

New York

The process of dropping out of school typically starts early, in the lower-level grades, where attendance rates provide tell-tale signs of trouble in a student's educational career, particularly when schools fail to respond to this indication of problems. Thereafter, educators say, the cumulative effect of failure, disillusionment and disengagement take their toll. "Something happens by the third or fourth grade, when they start to say, 'I'm not doing so well,'" notes Tyra Randall, principal of Bushwick Community High School (formerly Bushwick Outreach Center) in Brooklyn. "And by the eighth grade," she adds, "they decide, 'I don't need this crap they're teaching me anyway.'"

By the time they reach high school, many potential dropouts begin to look a lot like the students at Bushwick, where the typical youngster is 18 or 19 years old and has anywhere from 5 to 15 credits, but not nearly the 40 needed to graduate. He or she "could be married, living alone, have a job, come from a single parent household, or a double parent household," Randall says.

Angel Chacon, 18, lives with his parents. The youngest of four, he simply "started drifting away and thinking about materialistic things," meaning the money he could make selling drugs. He bounced from the High School of Art and Design in Manhattan to a school in North Carolina and back to New York, to Grover Cleveland High School in Queens, where he

had accumulated a mere eight credits by the age of 16. A counselor told him to leave, he said. There was also an arrest, at least one soul-searching conversation with his mother and a realization that he didn't want to be the family dropout. He heard about Bushwick from a neighbor, and said he was skeptical at first, thinking that it would be like all the other schools, but he says he's come to realize that school personnel meant it when they said they would be there for him. "It's all been good," he says. "They stood up to their words. They're like parents."

Teachers and administrators at the school like to use the term "glue." For history teacher Brian Favors, the glue that creates a sense of belonging and a sense of community for the kids is the cultural piece, including classes on the Harlem Renaissance, slavery and civil rights. A testament to this notion, he says, can be found in the fact that the students are considered to be among the most at-risk in New York City public schools, yet they're well-behaved—and they behave, he suggests, because they're engaged in what they're learning. "The fact that we had only one fight (last year blew my mind)," he declares.

For teacher and assistant principal Jennifer Ostrow, finding the right people to be at the head of the classroom is the single most important part of running the school. "I can't recruit by offering more money," she explains, "so I'm counting on the fact that smart people want to work in places where they have creative freedom and a horizontal hierarchical structure."

For Randall, it's the size. Bushwick has 335 to 340 students at any given time. It's located in a wing of Roland Hayes Intermediate School, or IS 291, and is the kind of place students go to when they're forced to leave their neighborhood schools—the large, im-

personal institutions where students often say they feel that teachers don't care if they come to class or not. "If you can show me a 19- or 20-year-old in a regular, traditional high school, I'd be surprised," Randall said. "By 17 or 18, and with only a few credits... they are encouraged to look at other programs. The guess is that the student is going to drop out."

Educators say that this is not a new phenomenon. For years, administrators have nudged troublesome and low-achieving students out the door, but many fear that in recent years, the nudge has become more of a shove, and students are now being pushed out of school at alarming rates.

Critics attribute much of the "pushout" problem to the twin faces of accountability and testing, which have been put in place with increasing frequency since the mid-1980s and became national policy with approval of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001. The legislation requires that states measure the academic success of subgroups—including the poor and racial and ethnic minorities—and that they show annual improvement in their test scores. To that end, it encourages school systems to cater to all students, not just a few.

The same law also requires states to measure dropout rates—another noble goal. But what has happened in some cases is that schools—buckling under the pressure to show positive results—have either fudged the data or pushed unsuccessful students out the door, encouraging them to opt for a work program or a GED.

In tandem with the federal law, many states have implemented graduation tests requiring students to pass a standardized exam before walking across the stage to get their diploma, and that, some argue, has become

an additional deterrent for those already on a precarious path to graduation. "Kids who are doing very, very well are not going to even notice these tests," says the University of Minnesota's Robert Warren. "They are an obstacle to kids at the other end. It's those kids right on the margin—the C students—who will be pushed from graduating to not graduating."

Warren studied high school completion rates for each state from 1973 to 2000 and found a correlation between dropout rates and exit tests. "We find that high school exit examinations—particularly 'more difficult' examinations that have recently been implemented in some states—are associated with lower high school completion rates and higher rates of GED test taking."¹⁴ The rate at which 16-to-19-year-olds take the GED is statistically higher in states with high school exit exams, the report said.

At the national level, teenagers accounted for nearly 49 percent of those who earned a GED certificate in 2002, up from 33 percent in 1992.¹⁵ In raw numbers, close to 160,000 teenagers received a GED in 2002 instead of a high school diploma.¹⁶ But a GED still lags behind a high school diploma in the educational pecking order, and those with a GED, unless they go on to college, will face roughly the same economic prospects as a dropout.

New York City, according to the 2004 Harvard study, "provides probably the clearest anecdotes of test-driven accountability gone awry."¹⁷ And that, in large part, is the result of the work done by Advocates for Children of New York (AFC). In a 2002 report, *Pushing Out At-Risk Students: An Analysis of High School Discharge Figures*, AFC documented the number of students "discharged" during the three school years spanning the fall of 1998 through the spring of 2001. There were

160,000 students who left the school system prior to graduation, the report said, ostensibly to enroll in another educational program, often a GED program. And in several schools, the number of discharged students exceeded the number of graduates. “What is alarming,” AFC concluded, “is that discharge rates may be used to mask potentially higher dropout statistics.”¹⁸

Advocates also brought lawsuits against the administrators of three New York City high schools—Franklin K. Lane, Martin Luther King and Bushwick High School*—as well as Chancellor Joel Klein for illegally pushing students out of school. There was 17-year-old Gabriel Ruiz, a repeat 9th grader who was asked to leave Franklin K. Lane and get a GED. When he and his mother insisted he stay and get a regular diploma, school officials said the state could not waste any more money on his education. After AFC filed a lawsuit on his behalf, the school agreed to take him back, but by then he had missed more than four months of school. And he is but one of 27 plaintiffs who have similar stories.

The litigation, which began in March 2003, came to an end in June 2004 when an agreement was reached between the Bushwick students and the school system. An earlier settlement had been reached with the Franklin K. Lane students, and the Martin Luther King case was dismissed when the school was dismantled and completely reconfigured. In the settlements, however, the city’s Department of Education went a long way toward assuring skeptics that it was at least making an effort to ensure students would no longer be forced out of school: it agreed to re-enroll “separated” students; to provide them with “reconnection” services; to hold exit hearings for students being suspended or transferred; and to disseminate informa-

tion about their rights, including the right to stay in school through the school year in which they turn 21. “We are very satisfied with the settlements,” says Elisa Hyman, deputy director of AFC, “and [we] are cautiously optimistic that the Department will continue to take voluntary steps to ensure that students are not excluded from school.”

In addition to reacting directly to the “pushout” charges, the city’s Department of Education is also launching a system-wide program to create small, personalized, academically rigorous schools. Seventy are slated to open at the start of the 2004–2005 school year, including 60 at the secondary level and four, known as Diploma Plus Schools, aimed exclusively at potential dropouts. The impetus for these changes, at least in part, is the nationwide push for higher academic standards in the classroom. “It’s as big a challenge as the Industrial Revolution,” says Michele Cahill, the school system’s senior counselor for education policy (and a former Carnegie Corporation of New York program officer). To address the challenge, she says, “we need to reinvent the kinds of institutions we have in place.”

Las Vegas

Not three miles from the towering spectacle of the Bellagio, Caesars Palace and the other hotel casinos comprising the Las Vegas strip, 18-year-old Andres Altamirano sat in his old classroom at Clark High School and looked back at how his young life would have been changed if things had turned out differently, if he had let gangs become the driving force in his life, if he had not entered a special program for at-risk students, if he had dropped out, and if he had not, in the end, earned a high school diploma.

“I probably wouldn’t be here,” he said, visiting teachers, showing off his infant son, and talking about his

* *A different school than Bushwick Community High School*

plans to get an associates degree and become a parole officer.

Altamirano's family is like many of the thousands now flocking to Las Vegas. Lured by a thriving job market, his parents moved the family from Los Angeles to Las Vegas six years ago. Since then, one of Altamirano's older brothers has finished school, and two dropped out, contributing to one of the highest dropout rates in the nation.

In a ranking of the country's 100 largest school districts, the Harvard study found that Clark County, Nevada, had a 51.9 percent completion rate, which put it in 67th place. The same can be said for the state of Nevada as a whole. The Harvard study found Nevada's 38 percent graduation rate for Hispanics was the lowest in the nation, the African-American graduation rate of 41 percent was the second lowest, and white students had the third lowest at 62 percent. Overall, the state's students came in at 49th with a graduation rate of 54.7 percent.¹⁹ Another measure, one kept by the National Center for Education Statistics, gave Nevada a much higher completion rate of 73.5 percent, but it still came in fourth from the bottom.²⁰

"If we wanted to reduce the dropout rate, we could do it tomorrow," says Carlos Garcia, superintendent of the Clark County Public Schools, "if, as a community, we commit to not hiring anyone unless they have a high school diploma." He loses many students to the lure of low-skilled, high-wage jobs in the gaming industry. "Kids are parking cars on the strip and earning anywhere from \$40,000 to \$80, 000," he explains. "That's unique to Las Vegas."

Garcia knows, however, that his magic-wand solution will never take place and parking cars at the

Bellagio will never require a high school diploma, so he's implementing a wide range of programs aimed at raising academic standards and keeping kids in school while, at the same time, he grapples with record-setting growth. The academic changes include plans to provide full-day kindergarten district wide; an expansion of Advanced Placement classes; adding algebra to the district's graduation requirements; broader use of block scheduling; giving the PSAT to all 10th graders; and helping teachers learn how to teach limited-English-proficient students.

More than 12,000 new students show up at the district's doorstep each year. As a consequence, it hires 2,000 new teachers annually, and, on average, it's opened 8 new schools each year since 1993. This year, it will open 13 new schools and one replacement school; next year, it will open the first of its new mall high schools. The new high school will be modeled—literally—after a shopping mall, with the same kind of corridors and ambient light. Each is expected to house 2,700 to 3,000 students, and will be divided into four separate schools within the building, each with its own principal, administration, teaching staff and approximately 700 students.

It's part of the district's effort to create smaller learning environments at the secondary level. Several of the middle schools and a few of the already existing high schools have, in recent years, undertaken a hodge-podge of small-school efforts. One of those is Clark High School, which has been a model for change since former principal Wayne Tanaka turned the once-troubled campus around in the mid-1990s.

His approach was multifaceted. He rallied community support, launched a successful fundraising campaign, and led an effort to rid both the campus

and surrounding neighborhoods of crime and gang activity. He also created four small schools within a school—three magnet programs organized around themes (science and technology, finance and teaching) and a fourth dedicated exclusively to helping would-be dropouts stay in school. The program is known as Teaching Reading Across the Curriculum for Success, or TRACS.

Located in a wing of Clark's sprawling campus, the TRACS program is small. It started with 60 students in the 1999-2000 school year, and last year, it had 110—all of them almost certain to drop out. "Every kid in that [first] class had failed almost all their classes," notes English teacher Joanne Ho. "Realizing that, we said, 'Oh my gosh, what did we get ourselves into?'"

For Ho, it's turned out to be, as she says, "the shot in the arm for teaching I needed." The smaller size has allowed her, along with her three colleagues, to work as a team, to coordinate what they teach, how they teach and how they deal with each individual student. "The program enabled me to do what I'd always dreamed of doing as a teacher," Ho says. "Working with all the team teachers has been a blessing, because you don't have to do it alone anymore."

Catering to a relative handful of students in the 9th and 10th grades, the TRACS teachers have created a devoted following of students. There's Altamirano, of course, who credits his teachers for giving him the encouragement he needed. "They're the ones who told me I could do it," he says. There's also Kristi Harper, 17, who will be a senior when school starts this fall. "I didn't think I was going to finish high school," says Harper. She's no longer in the TRACS program, but she says, of her TRACS teacher, "I come back to Ms. Wagner for anything I need."

And there's Jose Godinez, who made arrangements to stay at Clark, even though his family moved to another part of town, which would have put him in another school. Though he will be a senior this year and no longer eligible for the TRACS program, Godinez, like Harper, still relies on a TRACS teacher—the same Ms. Wagner—to be the counselor, the mentor, the one caring adult who often makes the difference for at-risk students. "Ms. Wagner is the best teacher I've ever had," Godinez said. "She's like my mom."

Luanne Wagner has been teaching for six years. She and Ho, who has been teaching for fourteen years, have worked in tandem for the past five years, since TRACS was created. They were there at the beginning when, as a group, they decided the students needed a strong dose of teamwork and character education. In response, they opted to adopt the five core values—caring, respect, responsibility, trust and family—promoted by Community of Caring, a K-12, whole-school, comprehensive education program with a particular focus on disabilities, founded by Eunice Kennedy Shriver in 1982. "The students were all loners," Ho says, "but we told them, 'We're not leaving anyone behind, so you can either help each other or be very, very patient.'"

Ho, Wagner and the other two teachers who created the TRACS program also decided the students needed food, so they stocked up on healthy snacks. Since Wagner had read that coffee helps the learning process, they provided steaming cups of Starbucks. "They [the students] had food, they had coffee and character education," Wagner says, "and it seemed to work."

In addition, TRACS teachers incorporated a six-week series of classes in conflict resolution, as well as lesson plans in tolerance and nonviolent forms of protest

featuring Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Ghandi and others. And, for a group of students who had been told repeatedly that they were going to fail, they were given constant infusions of positive reinforcement, which included an annual awards ceremony, in which everyone received recognition of some kind. The result has been a dramatic improvement in the behavior of a characteristically unruly group of young people. “We never have behavior problems,” Ho says. “If we do, we resolve it, and we’re shaking hands before it’s done, rather than writing a note and sending them down the hall.”

The results so far show that the TRACS program has indeed made a dent in preventing students from dropping out. To date, about half the students who begin the program as freshmen have ended up with a high school diploma.

In support of their efforts, the TRACS teachers have had the backing of school administrators, as well as financial reinforcement from a local businesswoman who gave more than \$3,000 a year for four years. In addition, the students hold fundraisers, including one last year where they made \$800 selling roses made from candy kisses for Valentine’s Day. And Ho, for example, is not above asking local grocery store and fast food chains for a contribution: coupons from Chili’s and Wendy’s, a few dozen donuts from Krispy Kreme.

TRACS closely adheres to many of the practices required to promote a successful learning experience for at-risk kids. It provides students with a personalized learning environment and a caring adult who will see them not only through the 9th and 10th grades, but will also be there for them in the 11th and 12th grades. (Although the program is only formally offered to 9th and 10th graders, former TRACS students grades can

still consult their TRACS teachers later on.) It infuses all classes—math, science and social studies—with a large dose of instruction in reading and writing; and the teachers work as a team to incorporate lessons, such as character education, and to develop extra-curricular and motivational activities, like the awards ceremony.

These are key components of the small-school reform effort that began in the mid-1990s and continues today with district-wide efforts to overhaul failing schools in places like New York, Chicago, Houston, Boston and San Diego. Several reform efforts are funded in part by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation through initiatives like *Schools for a New Society*. Launched by the Corporation in 2001, with participation by the Gates Foundation, it provides \$60 million to seven urban school systems to foster large-scale, district-wide change at the high school level. And a separate program, *New Century High Schools*, provides more than \$50 million to redesign low performing, large-scale schools in New York City and create a variety of small-school settings for middle- and high-school students.

But small school advocates caution that size alone is not enough to constitute reform. Small schools are only effective, they say, when coupled with a coordinated effort to improve instruction, teacher quality, teacher support, professional development and personalization. “I’ve seen small schools that are not great schools,” says Constanca Warren. “Small schools improve the conditions for teaching and learning. They don’t in and of themselves improve teaching and learning.”

And the kind of concerted effort needed to do just that, to improve teaching and learning nationwide and bring America’s high schools into the 21st century,

has not taken place, according to Legters and Balfanz: “School systems—lacking the knowledge, the resources and often sufficient resolve—have implemented some, but not all, of the necessary reforms, and consequently they’ve fallen short of their goals to bolster both academic performance and graduation rates.”²¹

The outlook, they warn, is grim: “Until the nation’s

dropout factories are reformed or replaced, the promise of the American High School as an engine of economic growth and social transformation will not be met. Furthermore,” the authors caution, since most of these schools cater to large numbers of poor and minority students, they “not only deny many the promise of equal educational opportunity; they act as a wedge driving the country further apart.”²²

Endnotes

- ¹ *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind By The Graduation Rate Crisis*, a joint release by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, the Urban Institute, Advocates for Children of New York and Results for America, a project of the Civil Society Institute, 2004.
- ² *Locating the Dropout Crisis*, Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters, The Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, June 2004.
- ³ *High School Exit Examinations and State-Level Completion and GED Rates, 1973-2000*, John Robert Warren, Krista N. Jenkins and Rachael B. Kulick, Department of Sociology, University of Minnesota, May 2004.
- ⁴ *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000*, National Center for Education Statistics, November 2001.
- ⁵ *2002-2003 New York State School Report Card*, New York State Department of Education, 2004.
- ⁶ *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000*.
- ⁷ *Lessons of a Century*, staff of *Education Week*, 2000.
- ⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁹ *Dollars & Sense, the Cost Effectiveness of Small Schools*, Knowledge Works Foundation, 2002.
- ¹⁰ *Locating the Dropout Crisis*.
- ¹¹ *Lessons of a Century*.
- ¹² *The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings*, U.S. Census Bureau, July 2002.
- ¹³ *Losing Ground with No Job Recovery in Sight: The Growing Labor Market Plight of Teens and Young Adults in Illinois*, Andrew Sum and Ishwar Khatiwada, Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, March 2004.
- ¹⁴ *High School Exit Examinations and State-Level Completion and GED Rates, 1973-2000*.
- ¹⁵ “More Youths Opt for G.E.D. Tests, Skirting the Hurdle of High School,” Karen W. Arenson, *The New York Times*, May 15, 2004.
- ¹⁶ *Who Passed the GED Tests? 2002 Statistical Report*, General Educational Development Testing Service of the American Council on Education, 2004.
- ¹⁷ *Losing Our Future*.
- ¹⁸ *Pushing Out At-Risk Students: An Analysis of High School Discharge Figures*, Public Advocates for the City of New York and Advocates for Children of New York, November 21, 2002.
- ¹⁹ *Losing Our Future*.
- ²⁰ *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000*.
- ²¹ *Locating the Dropout Crisis*.
- ²² *ibid.*

Notes

Notes

Notes