

# Turning Poverty into Promise: From High School Remediation to College Degrees

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## Summary

School systems are under increasing pressure to decrease high school dropout rates and increase successful matriculation into postsecondary institutions. In Philadelphia, a variety of innovative programs are being deployed to increase high school graduation rates and improve statistics related to college engagement. This article profiles initiatives targeting both high school and college-level students, and details how these programs are rethinking educational paradigms to improve individual student outcomes and benefit Philadelphia and the surrounding region as a whole.

## Introduction

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School districts are seeking innovative solutions to improve graduation rates and reduce dropout rates. As a result, many are seeking effective credit recovery and/or

alternative education options for students who are over-age and off track from completing high school or who have dropped out of school altogether. In addition, urban cities are facing intense pressure to improve their local economies and most have agreed that the primary strategy should be increasing the educational level of their residents.

Cecilia Le and Lili Allen (Le 2011), in their report *From Remediation to Acceleration*, posit that alternative education has long been a part of the education landscape, but never before has it faced the challenge of preparing students not only to complete high school but also to succeed in postsecondary education. In today's economy, most people will not be able to support a family with just a high school diploma and therefore need to seek a postsecondary degree or other credential.

Helping off-track high school students graduate with the academic competencies needed to be successful in college can seem like an overwhelming challenge. To attempt to find innovative solutions, educators and investors are asking the following questions: What does it take for teachers in alternative settings, working with academically behind students, to accelerate the academic competencies that are valued in today's workforce and higher education economy? What are the critical support services needed for students who may have struggled with attendance and disciplinary issues? How can leaders who believe in the concept of "college for all" enable low-

income students to access and graduate from postsecondary school? Educators, in any urban environment, are grappling with these questions and piloting solutions.

This article provides an analysis of the issues surrounding high school graduation and college access and success for low-income young people. The article describes potential large-scale solutions through accelerated high schools and college access/success pilots. This article highlights the accelerated school case example of Camelot for Kids, Inc. and the college access and success partnership between I-LEAD, Education-Plus, Inc. and Harcum College. The article provides a social return on investment calculation along with potential policy implications for high school and college completion.

## **The Problem**

### **The Problem: High Costs and Negative Social Impact of High School Dropout Rates and Low College Completion**

There is a silent epidemic of low educational achievement in our nation. Each year, in Philadelphia, approximately 4 in 10 Philadelphia students leave school without obtaining a diploma. Further, only about half of Philadelphia's students graduate high school within 4 years of entrance and, of this group, many graduate reading and writing far below the twelfth-grade level. Only 1 in 7 Philadelphians

has a college degree, ranking the city 92nd out of the 100 largest municipalities in the country in educational attainment. The city as a whole struggles to attract and grow private industry with a workforce largely unprepared for 21st-century work (Graduate! Philadelphia 2005). Consider the following high school graduation and college matriculation, persistence and graduation statistics (Philadelphia Council for College and Career Success 2011):

- The percentages of first-time ninth-graders on track to on-time graduation from 2009 to 2011 were 62 percent, 60 percent and 66 percent, respectively.
- The 4-year cohort graduation rates for school district high schools were 56 percent (first-time ninth-graders of '05-'06), 58 percent (first-time ninth-graders of '06-'07) and 61 percent (first-time ninth-graders of '07-'08), respectively.
- The 6-year cohort graduation rates for school district high schools were 60 percent (first-time ninth-graders of '05-'06), 63 percent (first-time ninth-graders of '06-'07) and 61 percent (first-time ninth-graders of '07-'08), respectively.
- The percent of district high school graduates matriculating to college within one year from 2009 to 2011 were 45 percent (high school graduates of 2008), 47 percent (high school graduates of 2009) and 47 percent (high school graduates of 2010), respectively.

- Of the district students who enrolled in college within one year, the percent who earned an associate's or 2-year college degree within 6 years of starting college from 2009 to 2011 were 5 percent (high school graduates of 2003), 6 percent (high school graduates of 2004) and 5 percent (high school graduates of 2008), respectively.
- Of the district students who enrolled in college within one year, the percent who earned a B.A. or 4-year college degree within 6 years of starting college from 2009 to 2011 were 37 percent (high school graduates of 2003), 34 percent (high school graduates of 2004) and 36 percent (high school graduates of 2008), respectively.

Unfortunately this is not unique to Philadelphia. As noted in the figure below, the national high school graduation rates hover around 50 percent and national 2-year college completion rates for the high-school-to-associate's-degree pipeline are around 26 percent.

Educators around the country continue to seek ways to battle this epidemic, as the consequences of dropping out are long-term and high-cost to society. Non-high school graduates and even, in today's economy, high school graduates are more likely to have difficulty obtaining employment, often remain underemployed and are concentrated in low-paying jobs that do not afford them the opportunity to live stable and independent lives.

Lower salaries and poor job prospects lead to a lifetime of poverty for those who choose to leave school without obtaining a diploma. Overall, young adults with low education and skill levels are more likely to live in poverty, be in poor health, and to receive government assistance (Laird 2007; Martin 2002; Moore 2002).

Young people who drop out of high school are unlikely to have the minimum skills and credentials necessary to function in today's increasingly complex society and technology-dependent workplace. The completion of high school is required for accessing postsecondary education, and is a minimum requirement for most jobs (Laird 2006). By the time they are 18-24 years old, youth who have dropped out of high school are more likely to be neither employed nor enrolled in school than are youth who have completed high school (Snyder 2008).

It is clear that a range of factors may increase a student's risk of dropping out, including high rates of absenteeism, low levels of school engagement, low parental education, work or family responsibilities, problematic or deviant behavior, moving to a new school in the ninth grade, and attending a school with lower achievement scores (Suh 2007; Christie 2007; Rumberger 2004; Balfanz 2004). Specifically, Ruth Curran Neild and Robert Balfanz (2006) identified the following factors as reliable predictors of whether or not a student will drop out of high school:

- Attendance: Ninth graders who attended school less

than 70 percent of the time;

- Credits Earned: Ninth graders who earned less than two credits during their freshman year; or
- Achievement: Ninth graders who were not promoted to tenth grade.

Essentially, the problem is that a significant number of youth are dropping out of high school and educators and social innovators need to find ways to reverse this trend.

## **Solution**

### **Solution: Accelerated Schools and High School/College Pipelines**

Education is the number one sustainable, long-term strategy to improve individual income, health and community economic development. Every additional year of education that a person attains translates to higher wages, increased benefits, improved personal health outcomes and longevity, increased social and civic engagement and even increased personal happiness (Laird 2006). An associate's degree yields 25 percent and a bachelor's degree over 60 percent more in annual earnings than a high school diploma alone, an amount exceeding \$1,000,000 over a lifetime. People with a college degree are 300 percent more likely to have a normal life expectancy. People with a college degree are 300-400 percent less likely to spend time in prison. High adult educational attainment levels translate to family

economic stability and have the greatest influence on the achievement levels of children.

This section of the article explores the early results of piloted solutions to ensure that students graduate from high school, and access and complete college, and why the models work.

## **Accelerated High Schools**

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At the high school level, there are currently 7 providers in Philadelphia operating 14 schools, serving 2,280 youth, as of 2011, in full-time and part-time programs, for a total cost of just over \$18 million. Full-day programs range from \$9,500 to \$10,200 per student. The providers, who were competitively procured in 2008, include:

- Camelot for Kids, Inc. (2 full-day programs, 635 students; 1 half-day program, 220 students)
- OIC (1 full-day program, 145 students; 2 half-day programs, 200 students)
- One Bright Ray (2 full-day programs, 390 students)
- Delaware Valley High School (1 half-day program, 200 students)
- Big Picture Philadelphia (1 full-day program, 165 students)
- Communities in Schools ( 1 full-day, computer-based program, 150 students)

- Ombudsman (3 half-day programs, 175 students)

Accelerated schools are the lynchpin of Philadelphia's education strategy, and they have proven their benefits, both quantitatively in independent research by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (Chiang 2010), as well as in the impassioned pleas by the hundreds of young accelerated school students who marched and made their voices known at City Hall in summer 2011.

Accelerated high schools (AHS) serve a critical student population. Their consumers are over-age (16-21), under-credit students and those who have or are at significant risk of dropping out. A 2011 Research for Action report cites that, of the students entering AHS in the first half of the 2010-11 school year (between September 2010 and January 31, 2011), more than a quarter tested below a fourth-grade reading level, while another 45 percent tested between the fifth- and seventh-grade levels (Edmunds 2011). Most of the students in these schools have fewer than one-third of the credits they need to graduate.

Jobs for the Future, the Philadelphia Youth Network and the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Multiple Pathways have identified 6 strategies to build college readiness, as outlined below (Le 2011).

1. Collaborative Group Work brings students together in small groups to engage in learning, with each student

accountable for her or his contribution.

2. Writing to Learn helps students, including English language learners, develop their ideas, critical thinking and fluency of expression in all subjects.
3. Literacy Groups help build comprehension, fluency and higher-level discourse across a variety of texts in different disciplines by assigning each student a role to play and structured guidelines for participation.
4. Questioning challenges students and teachers to use deep, probing questions to foster purposeful conversations and stimulate intellectual inquiry.
5. Classroom Talk encourages all students to develop their thinking, listening and speaking skills, and promotes active learning.
6. Scaffolding encompasses a broad range of techniques, such as pre-reading activities and graphic organizers, that help students connect prior knowledge, such as from an earlier grade, different content areas or personal experience, to challenging new concepts.

These schools are demonstrating great initial outcomes. A 2010 Mathematica report found that accelerated schools have improved academic outcomes for Philadelphia students at high risk for dropping out (Chiang 2010). The report states that accelerated school students graduated at higher rates and earned more credits over one school year as compared to students in other schools with similar prior achievement, attendance, disciplinary history and

demographic characteristics.

## **Case Study: Camelot's Excel Academies**

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The two Philadelphia schools that implemented the instructional strategies with the most fidelity, Excel Academy North and Excel Academy South, achieved strong skill gains, with between one-fourth and one-third of students advancing 4 grade levels in just one year (Le 2011). The schools themselves credit the strategies for these outcomes. The Excel schools are operated by Camelot for Kids, Inc., and each enrolls 200 to 300 students. Although the schools are privately managed, the district holds all of them to common citywide standards for accelerating student learning. Students typically complete the alternative school program within 2.5 years.

Out of newly enrolled students in Excel North in fall 2010:

- 50 were classified as "young and far from graduation": between 16 and 18 years old with few or new credits.
- 50 were between 17 and 18 years old and about halfway to graduation.
- 40 students fell in the "old and far" group: over 18 and more than a year from graduation.
- 7 were "old and close": just a few credits needed to

graduate.

Skill levels in reading and math ranged from the third-grade level up to the twelfth-grade level. On average, the students were performing at a seventh-grade level in reading and a sixth-grade level in math.

Camelot utilizes standard best practices across its 3 Excel Academies to promote student achievement and graduation. Kevin Marx, Executive Director of Camelot's Excel South Academy, whose motto is, "We don't drop out; we drop in," offered some insights into their program and best practices that have enabled them to re-engage at-risk students.

- **Expectations:** Expectations and objectives are clearly established and enrolled students are fully expected to meet them. Students are not only expected to graduate, but to enroll in a postsecondary institution upon graduation; this is partly achieved by requiring graduating students to apply to at least 3 postsecondary institutions. Excel promotes a culture of ownership and responsibility among its students. Students are aware that this is their education and success or failure depends upon the effort that they expend to earn their diplomas. Students are also aware that the Excel Academies are academically rigorous and that these are not behavior modification schools. A key component of this model is the understanding that, to enable effective instruction, it

is critical to first have a culture and defined norms in place and buy-in from the students.

- **Student Safety:** Fighting, bullying and possession of drugs and/or weapons are grounds for immediate expulsion at Excel Academies. Many students reported that bullying and other safety concerns were barriers to attending school regularly in their previous high schools.
- **Socialization:** A pro-social environment is encouraged. Established norms include expected behavior and empowering students to redirect each other in a positive way. Students are encouraged to make good decisions independently. This should translate within and outside of the classroom.
- **Educational Model:** Class sizes are smaller than typical Philadelphia School District schools, with about 20-25 students per class. Coursework is team-oriented and classes are 80 minutes long.
- **Coordinated Support Network:** Students are referred to social services providers if special needs are discovered. Many students dropped out of their previous schools due to lack of childcare options, substance and domestic abuse, homelessness and other problems. Students are referred for childcare services, counseling and other services to address social needs outside of the classroom.
- **Vocational/Technical Training:** Excel South offers a vocational curriculum that includes culinary arts, building trades and other programs to promote

practical skills for students. Studies show that students who participate in vocational/technical education at the high school level have significantly lower dropout rates than students who do not. For young people, vocational training provides a sense of immediate gratification that many at-risk youths seek; it helps these students make the connection between their education and career opportunities post-graduation.

## **College Access and Completion**

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Leaders and staff in a growing body of schools and programs believe that “college for all” needs to become a reality with the right program designs and adequate resources. These cutting-edge programs are striving not only to graduate students college-ready but also to build transparent and supported pathways into and through postsecondary education and family-sustaining careers. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, more than half of all new jobs through 2014 will require more than a high school diploma and 22 of the 30 fastest growing career fields will require some postsecondary education (Heckler 2005).

The Harcum College High School Partnership Model, which was facilitated by Education-Plus, Inc. and I-LEAD, proposes a college access and graduation model to drive

growth and scale in this emerging field of practice. Intended to set a higher standard for schools and programs serving students who are off track to postsecondary success, the model is also aspirational in nature. It assumes most schools and programs do not have all phases, or features, in place. Colleges and universities are encouraged to use the model as a framework to consider alternative models that substantially improve their college completion rates for non-traditional young people.

## **Case Study: Harcum College High-School-to-College Pipeline**

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The Harcum College high-school-to-college pipeline model facilitated by Education-Plus, Inc., and I-LEAD addresses the 3 primary barriers (financial, geographic and cultural) that impede college enrollment or completion. This partnership is a coordinated approach that increases the likelihood that students will receive the full spectrum of services and supports needed.

Dougherty and Lempa (2010) confirm that a coordinated approach that addresses motivation, empowerment and aspiration, academic rigor and readiness, the logistics of college application and financial aid assistance, and psycho-social factors is important to help students move

along the K-16 trajectory effectively. Within this model, not only do students come to class, they persist beyond enrollment and the first few semesters of study. Small but mighty, this model graduates 80 percent of its matriculated first-year students, while nationally only 25 percent of two-year college students earn a degree within 6 years.

The program's unique ingredients of success include:

- Convenience of time and location. To accommodate the schedules of working adults, classes take place at the same time and place two evenings per week close to where students live. Consolidating courses into four 8-week mini semesters per academic year, students earn an associate's degree in 5 to 6 traditional semesters.
- Maximum financial aid. Students achieve full-time status, thereby earning eligibility for a full financial aid package. Low-income students generally can fund 95 percent of tuition (priced substantially below average market costs) through financial aid.
- Maintenance of low cost. Bringing college directly into the community removes transportation and centralized campus expenses and leverages underutilized assets of neighborhood institutions to keep costs low.
- Relevant curriculum. Curriculum content relevant to work and life operationalizes the 21st-century skill set sought by employers: oral and written

communication, math, information technology, analytical skills, team building and leadership. The curriculum is taught in a classroom culture and with a teaching style targeted to adult learners. Students' college-level skills are efficiently developed through non-credit remedial courses taken alongside credit-bearing courses.

- Size of community. Limiting the student body to 100-150 students per site facilitates a personalized learning community.
- Cohort-based model. Students provide peer support demonstrated critical to success as they journey through the program together in learning cohorts.
- Student success services. A single point of contact at the community institution delivers academic and non-academic support services designed to help students navigate the unfamiliar bureaucracy of higher education and overcome barriers as they arise.

## **Structure and Financing of Higher Partnership Model**

## **Structure and Financing of Higher Education Partnership Model**

Harcum College: Delivers a Middle States-accredited associate's degree program, processes student applications and financial aid and maintains student

records. The associate's degree program is fully accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

I-LEAD/Education-Plus, Inc: Builds partnerships between high schools, coordinates operations, sources and trains student support staff in curriculum content and adult learning pedagogy, and provides technical assistance around financial aid and career counseling.

High School: Utilizes existing relationships with potential students to conduct high-touch and personal retention. Provides students with computer access to take classes, facilities for socialization, and support from learning coaches.

The model price structure is set just above what the average low-income student can leverage in financial aid and based upon the philosophy that even low-income students should contribute to a portion of their college education. Approximately 20 percent of tuition is used to pay the partnering school for use of facility, technology, student and student support/retention services.

## **Social Return on Investment**

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Decreasing Philadelphia's high school dropout rate offers an enormous financial and social return on investment

(SROI) to society. The formula below captures the anticipated financial value generated by accelerated high school and college access and completion pipelines.

As an example, the maximum cost of educating 600 students who enroll in Camelot's Excel Academies is approximately \$15.3 million, assuming that they spend an average of two years in the program before earning their diplomas. The cost to taxpayers is only 7 percent of the total estimated value of \$206.9 million generated by the program. This is independent of the increased tax collections, reduced cost of institutionalizing the young adults who may have turned to a life of crime after dropping out, and savings on public assistant payments. Furthermore, the non-monetary value to individuals who would have dropped out are tremendous.

The Harcum College high school pipeline is projected to reach 600 students annually by 2013. With an 80 percent graduation rate, the Harcum College High School partnership will graduate, with an associate's degree, approximately 480 students (160 students annually) who traditionally would not have accessed college. The total projected SROI over 3 years from 480 students with associate's degrees earning \$405,000 more than the alternative (high school degree) is approximately \$195 million over three years.

# Policy and Disruptive Innovation

## Policy and Disruptive Innovation

Enrollment in an alternative educational institution or low-cost associate's degree program might be viewed negatively by students and is not always preferable.

However, once these programs have been demonstrated to be student-centric and capable of contributing to high graduation rates, you will have students who are choosing these options over the traditional "preferred" programs.

As these models scale, these "left-behind students" will provide a disruptive innovation opportunity for non-traditional high schools and colleges to enter the educational market once monopolized by traditional school settings.

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