The Graduation Rate Tragedy in New York State

Two insightful columns on the problem of high school drop-outs recently appeared in *The New York Times*. The analysis in these columns is directly relevant for New York State.

A column by Robert Balfanz describes research showing that the drop-out problem is highly concentrated in relatively few high-poverty schools around the country. This column also explains that many students, particularly African-American and Latino boys, are not well served by their middle schools and high schools. As Balfanz put it, “the secondary schools these students attend are not specifically designed for them. It is not unusual for up to half the students to miss a month or more of school, and often more students are suspended in a year than graduate.” Moreover, in the schools studied closely by Balfanz and his team,

nearly all ninth-grade students were either too old for their grades, had repeated ninth grade, needed special education, were chronically absent or had academic skills at the seventh grade level or below. The norm in this environment is to fail classes and then repeat ninth grade. But most students do no better the second time around. Either they drop out then or they may briefly transfer to another school before dropping out later. This is a highly predictable, almost mechanical course, which is why we call those schools dropout factories.

Nevertheless, Professor Balfanz is optimistic that graduation rates can be raised. He argues that “high-poverty secondary schools need to be redesigned with the special problems of their students in mind, with a focus on freshman year” and that “early warning systems need to be instituted so that teachers and other committed adults can step in at the first sign a student is in trouble, whether it’s cutting class, mouthing off or floundering in English or math.” His program, Diplomas Now, and others that follow this strategy show some promise in their initial evaluations.

The column by Eduardo Porter is more discouraging. It cites research indicating that many young people drop out of high school because they observe the inequality in society and cannot imagine how they could succeed. He terms this “economic despair.” In more general terms, he concludes that “Inequality may perpetuate itself down the generations by messing up the decisions of underprivileged youth.”

Mr. Porter also sees some reasons for hope, however. New programs, such as Chicago’s Becoming a Man Program, may be able to break this cycle by providing troubled teenagers with new images of the employment possibilities that open up with a high school degree and by teaching them new ways to cope with situations that “might land them in a bad place.”
The problems highlighted in these two columns pose a great challenge for education policy makers in New York State. On June 23, the New York State Education Department released its annual report on high school graduate rates for students who entered high school in 2009. The news is not good. The graduation rates in New York State’s big cities and other poor districts are very low—and only a tiny bit higher than they were four years ago.

The main results in this report are presented in Figure 1. In low-need districts, defined as those with a low ratio of poverty to wealth, the graduation rate is almost 95 percent. Moreover, this rate is 85 percent in districts with average need. In big cities and other high-need districts, however, the graduation rates are depressingly low. In Rochester and Syracuse, over half of the students who entered 9th grade in 2009 did not graduate by June 2013. Just think of that. More than half of the entering students did not graduate. Think of the talent we are wasting. Think of the lost productivity for the State of New York. Think of the drop-outs who turn to illegal behavior out of frustration at their lack of job opportunities.

The graduation rates in New York City, Buffalo, Yonkers, and other high-need urban and suburban districts are not much better. Yonkers tops this list with a graduation rate of two-thirds, but Buffalo comes in at only 53.4 percent. These low rates impose costs on all New Yorkers.

I do not, of course, have a magic bullet for solving this problem, but I believe that it is a symptom of two central weaknesses in the New York State education finance system. The first weakness is the educational aid system, which is discussed in my November 2013 column. The State of New York has defaulted on its promise to implement a fair, adequate education aid funding formula, and the state’s poor districts cannot afford to implement new, potentially expensive drop-out prevention programs.

Second, the New York State Education Department has dropped the ball on its responsibility to help needy districts solve the drop-out problem. The graduation rate report says nothing about the steps high-need districts should be taking to raise graduation rates or about the funding available to these hard-pressed districts for steps of this type. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, NYSED has not conducted research on the types of drop-out prevention programs that might be successful in New York’s troubled districts.

New York State must move beyond simply calling for higher standards and start providing needy districts with the help they need.

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1 If one adds the students who graduated in the summer of 2013, the graduation rate is just over one half, 51.9 percent, in Syracuse, but remains below one-half at 48.1 percent in Rochester.
2 Moreover, NYSED would stop making claims of progress that are not supported by the evidence. The latest graduation rate report finds that students who were once in an ELL program but no longer are have a graduation rate of 71 percent compared to 31 percent for students who remain in such a program. Commissioner King is quoted as saying “On the very positive side, the graduation rate for students who previously were in programs for English Language Learners demonstrates that all students thrive when provided with appropriate support services.” These results do not demonstrate any such thing. They simply show that students who outgrow their need for an ELL program tend to be more dedicated and/or talented than other ELL students.
Figure 1. High School Graduation Rates in New York State, 2009 Cohort

References

