

## Dropouts: The Missing Link



Theresa Hinkle,  
President, NMSA



Larry Bradley,  
President, NASSP

**D**ropout rates indicate that despite improvement efforts, far too many students are still falling through the cracks. High schools bear the weight of dropout statistics, but in reality the disengagement from school that can lead to dropping out begins far earlier. And while ninth grade has generally been targeted as the focus for dropout prevention programs, in many cases, it is too late to begin these efforts.

Sixth graders who attend school less than 80%, receive a poor final grade from their teachers in behavior, and are failing either mathematics or English, are at high risk for dropping out in high school. By eighth grade, the predictions are even more startling. Eighth graders who fail English or math or have high absenteeism have only a 12-13% likelihood of graduating from high school, and those with poor behavior will have a 20% chance. (Graduation Path in Philadelphia Study; Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007)

The implications are clear—if we are truly serious about increasing the number of high school graduates, **both** middle schools and high schools must tackle the issue. NASSP and NMSA are committing to work collaboratively on this pressing matter. Preparing students for success in school and life is a goal we educators must all share. We must help all students find success early in their school careers, for students who succeed at the middle level are far more likely to succeed in—and complete—high school.

How can this happen? Our organizations believe significant results will occur when middle level and high schools work together to:

- create seamless transitions from the time students enter middle school until they graduate from high school, and ensure that curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned and targeted to meet the needs of every student they serve.
- offer a relevant, challenging curriculum that supports all students in meeting high standards, is taught in ways that engage students, and is assessed by multiple measures.
- understand and appreciate the unique nature and needs of the students they serve.
- tailor instruction and programs to recognize the significant changes in physical, emotional, social, and cognitive maturity that occur between the time students enter middle school and graduate from high school.

- promote professional conversations between faculties that move beyond the basics of curriculum articulation and delve into topics that genuinely personalize the learning and the school experience for *all* students at *all* grade levels.
- ensure that all social, economic, and racial/ethnic groups have open and equal access to challenging activities and learning.
- engage families in the educational process in a meaningful manner.
- base school improvement efforts on research-based practices such as those articulated in *This We Believe* (NMSA), *Breaking Ranks II* (NASSP), and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (NASSP).
- support federal investments in both middle level and high school education such as the Success in the Middle and Graduation Promise Acts.

There's a story of three friends who went fishing. All of a sudden a baby in a basket came floating down the river. They grabbed the baby and brought it to shore, but before they could do anything else, three more babies came floating down the river. They jumped back into the water and rescued the babies. No sooner did they put the baskets down when a steady stream of babies-in-baskets began coming down the river. They formed a bucket brigade and while not one baby was drowned, the babies just kept coming. After about 25 minutes of saving babies, one man said, "I've had enough of this!" He waded to shore and walked away. The friends yelled out, "Where are you going? You can't leave us here with this problem!" He turned and answered, "I'm going upstream to stop whoever is throwing these babies in the water!"

If we continue to view dropout rates only as a high school problem, we can never stop the flow of "babies floating down the river". Since we can identify a potential dropout as early as sixth grade—with some bodies of research suggesting that we can make the determination even sooner—we must not wait until that student is in ninth grade to begin providing the additional support needed to successfully complete high school. Instead we must work jointly to ensure student success at all levels—from kindergarten on. But it can't be done alone. NASSP and NMSA challenge our members and other educational groups to join with us in this effort. Only by working together can we make a difference.

