How Many Central City High Schools Have A Severe Dropout Problem, Where Are They Located, and Who Attends Them?

Initial Estimates Using the Common Core of Data

by
Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters
Center for Social Organization of Schools
JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

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How severe is the problem? What do we know about intervention and prevention?

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Introduction

Existing dropout statistics paint a bleak picture for urban youth. At just under 10%, the single year dropout rate for urban districts is nearly twice the national average, with some urban districts struggling with single year dropout rates as high as 20% (Education Week, 1998). It is not surprising that many states and the federal government are calling for major educational reform in urban areas. Unfortunately, aggregated district-level dropout data provide little information about the sites of potential intervention, i.e. the high schools that students attend. While it is generally assumed that the high dropout rates in urban districts are at least in part due to low performing high schools, little is known about how many of these failing schools there are, where they are located, and who attends them. Such information is critical for policymakers, reformers and others concerned with directing resources not only toward measuring the dropout problem, but toward fixing it as well.

The purpose of this study is to begin identifying schools and districts where the high school dropout problem is likely to be most acute. Our central measure of a low performing high school is the ratio of twelfth graders to ninth (or tenth) graders over a four-year period, also called the "holding" or "promoting power" of a school. In the first section of this paper, we use data from Baltimore and Philadelphia to argue that this ratio is a strong indicator of the overall institutional health of a high school and offers a school-based indicator of a school's dropout rate. We then use national data to identify schools with weak holding/promoting power in the 35 largest central cities across the country. These data reveal an unacceptable number of inner city public high schools that fail to serve the largely minority and low-income students who attend them. They also show cities where the majority of public high schools are weak institutions, essentially denying students access to educational opportunities that meet even the most minimum standards. In the end, however, we argue that the overall number of failing high schools in these urban areas is not so large as to be beyond the reach of committed policy intervention.

<u>Holding/Promoting Power</u>

Holding power is determined through a ratio comparison of the number of students at two time periods. Typically it is used to either compare the number of 9^{th} graders with the number of seniors or, when the data is available, the number of high school graduates four years later. This measure is beginning to be used with more frequency in both academic studies and policy making arenas. A recent ballot initiative in Michigan, for example, proposed making vouchers available to parents only in school districts where less than 2/3rds of freshmen graduate within four years (Steinberg, 2000).

The underlying assumption is that schools in which the number of seniors closely approximates the number of entering high school students three or four years earlier (depending on whether it is a 9-12 or 10-12 school) has strong "holding power" because most students have remained in school, been promoted in a timely fashion, and are on course to graduate. Since schools are supposed to be in the business of *promoting* students rather than *holding* them, we argue that it is semantically clearer and more accurate to refer to the comparison of the number of 9^{th} graders to the number of 12^{th} graders four years later as an indicator of "promoting power" rather than "holding power." Consequently, we will use the phrase promoting power throughout the remainder of this paper.

Promoting Power is not a direct measure of the drop-out rate:

It is important to distinguish promoting power from direct measures of a school's dropout rate. An annual dropout rate compares the number of students who dropped out in one year to the total number of students enrolled. A longitudinal cohort drop out rate follows students at the individual level over four or more years and records the number who graduate, transfer, and drop out. Comparing the number of students in twelfth grade to the number of students in the 10^{th} or 9^{th} grade three or four years earlier is susceptible to several biases which makes it unreliable as a direct measure of the drop-out rate. Some students may graduate in more than four years. Others may transfer to another school or educational institution from which they eventually graduate. Still others might leave and then return and graduate from high school at a later date or obtain a GED (Kominski 1990).

The number of 9^{th} grade students reported in the common core data we use will include some combination of first time ninth graders, students repeating the grade, and students who are no longer attending or never attended the school but are still on roll when the official count of 9^{th} graders is made. It also will not include students who entered into the ninth grade after the official count is made typically in later September or early October. The 12^{th} grade numbers will include students who made it to the 12^{th} grade ahead of time, on time, and beyond time. It also will include students who entered the school after the official twelfth grade count. Thus a school that has 50% fewer 12th graders than 9th graders four year earlier will not necessarily have a dropout rate of 50%.

Very weak Promoting Power, however, can signal a significant drop-out rate:

In spite of its biases, we argue that very weak promoting power is a good first order indicator of a school with a significant dropout rate. While promoting power does not provide an exact measure of the drop-out rate, schools that have senior classes that are 50% or smaller than the entering class four (or three) years earlier are likely to have high drop out rates or at the very least a combined transfer out/drop out rate that is substantial. This will particularly be the case if the 50% fewer 12th graders than 9th/10th graders ratio is maintained for multiple years. In Baltimore, for example, all eight of the large non-selective high schools have had senior classes that are at least 50% smaller than the entering freshmen class four years earlier throughout the 1990's (BCPSS 1995,1997). During this era the number of drop-outs roughly equaled the number of high school graduates. In 1995-96,for example, 4096 students drop out of school in Baltimore and 3827 students graduated (MSDE 1997).

We further argue that the validity of using promoting power as an indicator of the drop-out rate is strengthened when there are multiple high schools within a school district with weak promoting power. When this occurs it greatly decreases the likelihood that the large difference between 9th/10th grade enrollments and 12th grade enrollments in a school is the result of students transferring from weaker to stronger schools within the district or into alternative schools better suited to their needs. This can be seen in Table 1 which shows the district wide enrollment pattern for the Baltimore City high school class of 1997. Across the nine non-selective schools in the district there were 3217 (50%) fewer students enrolled in 10^{th} grade in 1994 than in 9^{th} grade in 1993. This decline is not matched by increases in 10^{th} grade enrollment relative to the 9^{th} grade enrollment in any of the districts selective, vocational, or alternative schools. In fact all of these schools have fewer 10^{th} graders than 9^{th} graders enrolled, though with declines not nearly as steep. This pattern holds across the four years of high school. When the Baltimore City high school class of 1997 graduated it had 5883 or 68% fewer members than were enrolled in the 9^{th} grade in 1993. Data on the number of GED's earned in Baltimore City during the 1990's, between 500 and 700 per year, further indicates that the large decline in the number of students enrolled in each succeeding year of high school does not reflect mass migration to other educational alternatives (MSDE 1997,1999).

Another potential weakness of using a promoting power measure as a proxy for the drop-out rate is that 9^{th} grade enrollments could include a large number of students who are repeating the ninth grade and might go on to graduate in large numbers. In some districts and policy circles allowing students to complete high school in five years is being proposed as a potential solution to enabling students with poor prior academic preparations to meet high standards (Johnston 2000, Feldman 2000). Recent detailed analysis of 9^{th} grade repeaters in Chicago (Roderick et al 1998) and Philadelphia (Neild & Balfanz 2001), however, do not support the notion that students in large urban districts who repeat the ninth grade go on to graduate in large numbers. Students who repeat the ninth grade are typically students with very weak academic skills and poor attendance habits (Roderick & Camburn1999, Neild & Balfanz 2001). Absent a strong and sustained intervention, there is little evidence that students who failed to be promoted to the tenth grade will right themselves by simply being given a second try (Roderick et al 1998). In Philadelphia, for instance, most ninth grade repeaters during the 1999-2000 school year did not do substantively better on their second try than in their first year. The typical student repeating the ninth grade passed only half of his or her courses, and, for a second time, failed to be promoted (Neild & Balfanz, 2001).

Currently there is an on-going longitudinal study in Philadelphia (PELS) which follows a random sample of students as they transition into, through, and out of high school (Neild & Weiss 1999). Figure 1 shows the location of students in the study three years after they were either promoted from or retained in the ninth grade. It shows that 9% of the students who repeated 9th grade got back on track and graduated on time and that 21% are still in school. The overwhelming majority of the students who were retained in ninth grade, however, have dropped out, gone to jail, been expelled, or left the district (Neild 2000).

Baltimore data presented in Table 1 also support this argument. Table 1 indicates that the decline in enrollment between 10th and 12th grade in Baltimore's non-selective high schools is nearly as great as the decline from 9th to 10th grade. In these schools even students who make it to tenth grade appear to have barely a 50/50 chance of making it to 12th grade on time. Even if you assume that half of the students who attended non-selective high schools in Baltimore repeat a grade and that half of these students eventually graduate (a higher ratio than found in the Philadelphia PELS data) this still implies a 49% dropout/transfer out of district rate for Baltimore's non-selective high schools.

Thus it is possible that a large difference between the number of 12^{th} graders and the number of entering $9^{th}/10^{th}$ graders three or four years earlier in a given school could reflect a shift in enrollment patterns (i.e. the loss of a major employer in a town), the transfer of students between schools within a district, or a large number of students successfully completing high school in five or more years. The detailed analysis of Baltimore and Philadelphia presented above, however, leads us to believe that in urban America these will be the exceptions not the rule.

Why its important to identify schools with very weak promoting power

Schools are a primary site of intervention for preventing and reducing the number of dropouts. While it is clear that there are large social forces which operate beyond the control of schools which push and pull students towards dropping out (Fine 1986), it is also clear that the declines in attendance, course passing rates, and attachment to schooling, which propel many high school students onto the final path towards dropping out can be ameliorated through school-based interventions (Wehlage & Rutter 1986, Finn 1989, Philadelphia Education Fund 2000, Neild & Balfanz 2001). Thus it is essential to find a measure which enables the identification of schools that are likely to have significant dropout rates and an understanding of where these schools are located and who attends them. One of the great advantages then of using weak promoting power as an indicator of a significant drop-out rate is that year by year enrollment data for grades 9 to 12 is readily available for every high school in the United States. Practically speaking, using a more exact measure like longitudinal cohort analysis at the individual level, at least in the near term, is not feasible on a widespread and consistent basis. An author of a recent but largely failed attempt to do this reports that "there is no standardized set of definitions and procedures currently used to determine the drop-out rate in school districts across the country. . . Familiarity with the process in several districts and the resulting information leads one to believe that dropout data are probably the least reliable information available today regarding the reality of schools." (Frymier 1996 p. 4).

Only measuring the dropout or high school completion rate at the district or state level does not reveal if the majority of dropouts are concentrated in a sub-set of schools and where these schools are located. The state of Maryland, for example, has recently been recognized for having the highest and most improved high school completion rate in the nation (MSDE 1999). This, however, obscures the fact that students in Baltimore are as likely to drop-out than graduate. Attempting to target resources towards individual students who have risk factors associated with dropping out is an inexact science that often misses many students who will drop out without a strong intervention. In each of Baltimore's non-selective high schools there is a group of students who participate in a state-wide drop-out prevention program which provides smaller class sizes and mentors. Ninth grade attendance and course passing rates, however, indicate that almost every student in the ninth grade in these schools is at risk for dropping-out absent strong and sustained interventions and support.

Thus, despite its limitations, we argue that used judiciously and with an understanding of its potential biases and limitations, promotion power is the best available school level indicator of high schools with a significant drop-out rate. We have selected the ratio of 50% or fewer seniors than freshmen (or sophomores in 10-12 schools) as our definition of weak promoting power to eliminate most of the likely scenarios in which schools have relatively low promoting power but not high drop-out rates. As soon will become clear, even if half of the ninth students who do not make it to twelfth grade on time eventually graduate (which is a generous assumption given the data from Baltimore and Philadelphia) this measure is identifying schools in which there is a high probability that at least a quarter and to a third of the students are dropping out.

It is also important to note that 50% cut-point is somewhat arbitrary and it may exclude a number of schools that have significant drop-out rates (e.g. a school with 60% as many seniors as freshmen or even 80% as many could still have a high-drop out rate). Thus while, our analysis may capture some schools with weak promoting power but low drop-out rates, it is perhaps more likely that it has produced an undercount of the number of central city high schools with a significant drop-out problem.

Data and Methods

Analyses in this study are based on data drawn from the National Center for Educational Statistics' Common Core of Data (CCD). The CCD is NCES' primary census database that includes information for the universe of all public elementary and secondary schools, school districts, and other educational administrative and operating units across the U.S. The CCD contains three types of data: general descriptive information (school location and type); demographic data on students and staff (enrollment by grade, student characteristics and number of classroom teachers); and fiscal data on revenues and expenditures. Data are submitted to NCES by state education agencies on an annual basis.

Data Filters: Because national data suggest that failing high schools are concentrated in urban areas, and because large proportions of minority and economically disadvantaged students attend these schools, we focused this study on schools with a tenth grade in the inner-city districts in the 35 largest central cities in the U.S. (those with populations of 400,000 or more). Within these parameters, we used CCD data from five separate years—1989/90, 1990/91, 1992/93, 1993/94 and 1995/96—which enabled us to cover two four-year time periods (1989/90 – 1992/93 and 1992/93 – 1995/96) and two three-year time periods (1990/91 – 1992/93 and 1993/94 – 1995/96). The three-year time periods were necessary to calculate the promoting power of schools with a 10^{th} – 12^{th} gradespan.

The geographic filter produces several anomalies which will be addressed in future research. First, it excluded Miami-Dade county the nations 4^{th} largest school district because the central city of Miami did not have 400,000 inhabitants in 1990, while clearly the greater urban area did. Second, a number of central cities, particularly in the South are in school districts which encompass both the central city and the surrounding county. In this analysis we included all high schools in the school district regardless if they were in the city or county.

We further filtered out very small schools (with student populations less than 300), schools with alternative or special education identifications, and schools that did not have a gradespan of at least 10^{th} – 12^{th} grades (e.g. 9^{th}-10^{th} schools and 11^{th} – 12^{th} schools).

Once we had applied these filters and created merged files representing the 89/92 and 92/95 time periods, we checked for overlap among the schools in each district across both time periods. Every district maintained nearly identical sets of schools across the two time periods except Los Angeles which lost nearly 50% of its schools in the sample from 89/92 to 92/95. Unable to explain this anomaly, we eliminated Los Angeles from the sample for the time being.

In addition, we discovered that just less than 10% of the schools (after excluding Los Angeles) actually gained students from 9th (or 10th) through 12th grades. An analysis of these schools showed that they represented one of three types of schools-- unusual education units such as special career, adult education or technology centers, elite (and often selective) public high schools, or schools that had formerly been 10-12 schools and recently added a small 9th grade class. Since the purpose of our study was to get a handle on typical, comprehensive public high schools, we filtered out the unusual education units. The schools that clearly had been 10-12 schools with a recently added 9th grade we treated as 10-12 schools and calculated the promoting power measure accordingly. The remaining set of schools we retained in the analysis, setting the promoting power variable to 100%.

The application of our filters resulted in a sample size of 603 schools for 1989/92 and 602 schools for 1992/95.

We constructed the promoting power variables by calculating the ratio of twelfth grade enrollment in 1992/93 to ninth grade enrollment in 1989/90 and twelfth grade enrollment in 1995/96 to ninth grade enrollment in 1992/93. For 10-12 schools, we calculated the ratio of twelfth grade enrollment in 1992/93 to tenth grade enrollment in 1990/91 and twelfth grade enrollment in 1995/96 to tenth grade enrollment in 1993/94. Variables for school size, location, minority concentration, and student race/ethnicity were drawn directly from the common core data files.

Findings

How Many Central City High Schools have Weak Promoting Power?

Table 2 indicates across both cohorts between forty and fifty percent of the central city high schools in the sample (236 schools for '89/'92 and 285 for '92/'95) have a promoting power of 50% or less. This suggests that in the largest 35 central cites the urban dropout problem may be concentrated in between 200 to 300 schools. We also find that promoting power is weakest in large schools (over 900 students) with minority student populations of 90% or more. In the 1989/92 period sixty-two percent of the sampled schools (n=126) had promoting power or 50% or less. In the 1992/95 period this increased to sixty-seven percent (n = 148). While large schools attended almost entirely by minority students account for about a third of the total sample, they account for more than half of all schools in the 35 largest cities with weak promoting power.

Figures 2a and 2b show the distribution of promoting power across the high schools in the sample. They indicate that promoting power got weaker in urban America during the first half of 1990's. From the 1989/92 cohort to the 1992/95 cohort there is a general shift towards weaker promoting power across all schools in the sample, an absolute increase in the number of schools with promoting power of 50% or less (236 schools in 1989/92 vs 285 schools in 1992/95), and a significant increase in the number of schools with *extremely* weak promoting power. In the 1989/92 cohort, the senior class was at least 70% smaller than the freshmen class in 57 schools, a number that increased to 78 in the 1992/95 cohort. Both Figures also show that there are nearly 100 additional high schools in the 35 largest cities that are close to meeting our definition of weak promoting power. These schools have between 40 and 49% fewer 12th graders than entering 9th or 10th graders three or four years earlier.

How are High Schools with Weak Promoting Power Distributed Across the Thirty –Five Largest Cities and Does the Distribution Change Over the Two Time Periods?

Table 3a rank orders the 35 largest central cities based on the percent of their high schools in the sample that have promoting power or 50% or less during the 1989/92 period. It shows that there is great diversity among the cities on this measure. In nine cities more than half the sampled high schools had weak promoting power. In four of the cities three fourths or more of the high schools had weak promoting power. Fourteen cities had five or more high schools with weak promoting power and eight had ten or more. At the other end of the distribution six cities had only one school, and eight cities had no schools in which the number of seniors was half or fewer than the number of freshmen. Overall, during the 1989/92 time period the 17 cities in the top half of the distribution have 94% of the schools in the sample with weak promoting power.

Table 3b shows that growth in the number of high schools with weak promoting power from the 1989/92 time period to the 992/95 time period reflects increases across the majority of cities in the sample. The number of cities in which half or more of the high schools had weak promoting power increases from nine to sixteen and the number of cities in which one or none of the high schools had weak promoting power declines from fourteen to eight. Overall, eighteen cities appear to have experience an intensification in the percent of their high schools with weak promoting power from the 1989/92 period to the 1992/95 period, seven cities experienced declines (though in only five of the seven cities were the percent declines the result of decreases in the number of schools with weak promoting power and not increases in the total number of schools in the sample), and in nine cities the percent of high schools with weak promoting power remained the same.

Most of the shifts in the number and concentration of high schools with weak promoting power from the 1989/92 to 1992/95 time period reflect changes in the enrollment patterns of one or two schools in a school district. Typically, either a school which had 40 to 49% fewer 12th graders than entering members of the class three or four years earlier saw this ratio increase to 50 to 59% in the 1992/95 time period or a school which had a 50 to 59% ratio moved into the 40 to 49% range. Thus overall, there is a fair degree of stability across the two time periods.

There were, however, a few exceptions to this general trend. El Paso, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Columbus, New York City, Oklahoma City, Washington D.C., Tucson, and Jacksonville all saw a twenty percentage point or greater increase in the percent of their high schools with weak holding power from the 1989/92 to 1992/95 time periods. At first glance the most dramatic increase seems to have occurred in El Paso which went from having only one high school (out of eight) with weak holding power in the 1989/92 time period to having seven high schools with weak holding power in 1992/95. Closer analysis reveals that this shift though substantial is not large as it might first appear. During the 1989/92 time period seven of the eight high schools in El Paso had 12th grade enrollments that were 43 to 51% smaller than 9th grade enrollments four years earlier. During the 1992/95 time period the ratios for these schools increased to 53 to 62% indicating a district wide increase of about 10 percent points.

The most severe increase appears to have occurred in Milwaukee which went from having five high schools with ratios greater than 50% and six schools with ratios less than 40% to only one school with a ratio less than 40% (39%) and eleven schools with a ratio greater than 50%. The only district which had more than a two school decline in the number of schools with weak promoting power from the 1989/92 to 1992/95 was Cleveland. During the 1989/92 time period thirteen of the fourteen Cleveland high schools in the sample had weak promoting power. This declines to five out of thirteen in the 1992/95 sample. A closer examination of the Cleveland data indicates that this appears to be the result of a district wide improvement in promoting power.

Where are High Schools with Weak Promoting Power Located and Concentrated?

There are distinct geographical patterns for cities with both high and low concentrations and numbers of high schools with weak promoting power. The cities with the highest numbers and concentrations are Northern and Midwestern industrial cities (Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, Indianapolis, Columbus, Milwaukee, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York City) or located in Texas (San Antonio, Fort Worth, Dallas, Houston, Austin, El Paso). Table 4b indicates that in these cities during the 1992/95 time period at least half and in most cases more than two-thirds of the public high school students attended high schools with weak promoting power. Table 4b also shows that for minority students the percentages are even higher. In Indianapolis, El Paso, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Houston, and Dallas, 80% or more of minority students attended high schools with weak holding during this time period.

Almost all of the sampled high schools (70 of 78), moreover, with *extremely* weak promoting power-senior classes that have 70% or fewer students than the number of freshmen four years earlier- are concentrated in six of these cities (New York, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore). Detroit, in particular, appears to have an intense concentration of schools with very weak promoting power. In both time periods more than half the high schools in the Detroit (n=13) met this criteria. Although, an in-depth analysis of why northern and midwestern industrial cities have such high concentration of high schools with weak promoting power is beyond the scope of this paper, some factors they have in common are high concentrations of poverty, residential segregation, and both neighborhood and selective city-wide magnet high schools. Together these forces tend to create large numbers of neighborhood high schools which are attended almost exclusively by students with multiple risk factors for dropping-out (Neild and Balfanz 2001).

There are also three southern cities (New Orleans, Nashville, and Memphis) with four to six high schools with weak promoting power in both time periods. During the 92/95 time period Denver, Oklahoma City, Jacksonville FL, and Washington D.C. join the list of cities with four or more high schools with weak promoting power.

The cities that have two or fewer high schools with 50% or fewer 12th graders than entering 9th or 10th graders four or three year earlier in both time periods are located primarily in the West (Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, San Jose, San Diego, Long Beach, Phoenix) but also includes Boston, Charlotte, and Virginia Beach. It is important to remember that this does not necessarily indicate that these districts do not have significant drop-out rates. Hispanics, for example, represent a large and growing part of the student body in many of the western cities. They also have the highest drop-out rate after the 8th grade which is not captured by this analysis (ETS 1995).). If the standard for weak promoting power, moreover, is relaxed to include all schools which have 40% or fewer 12th graders than entering students three or four years earlier than only four cities-San Jose, Long Beach, Phoenix, and Charlotte- had two or fewer schools with weak promoting power across both time periods.

Who Attends High Schools with Weak Holding Power?

Tables 5 shows that while students of all ethnicity's attend high schools in the nation's 35 largest cities with weak holding power, Hispanic and African-American students attended them disproportionately. During the 1992/95 time period, for example, African American students made up 44% of the students in the sample but 56% of the students who attended high schools with weak holding power. Hispanic students made up 25% of the students in the sample and 30% of the students in high schools with weak holding power. White students by contrast made up 23% of the sample but only 14% of the students who attended high schools with weak holding power.

Table 6 indicates that by the 1992/95-time period 60% of the African American and Hispanic students in the nation's 35 largest cities attended high schools with weak holding power. This compares to 29% of the white students and 24% of the Asian students.

Discussion and Policy Implications

Several findings emerge from the analysis of high schools in the 35 largest central cities with weak promoting power that have strong policy implications. First, in some large urban school districts, high schools with weak promoting power are pervasive and often dominant. In others large urban districts they are not. Thus different reform strategies will be called for in different locations. In places where only one or two high schools have weak promoting power, school based solutions ranging from grass-roots efforts to the adoption of a whole school reform model to reconstitution might be sufficient. In the nineteen cities, however, that had five or more high schools with weak promoting power, more systematic and perhaps more sweeping reforms are clearly needed. When a district has fifteen schools with weak promoting power it makes little sense to reform them one at a time using a scattershot of approaches. In these cities it is clear that most, if not the overwhelming majority of students, are not being well served by current forms of public secondary schooling.

In both cases, it will be necessary for districts, states, foundations, and the federal government to find ways to insure that the level of resources brought to bear are sufficient to address the fundamental weaknesses and great concentration of students placed at risk that in our experience often engulf urban schools with weak promoting power. Figure 3a details the characteristics of one of the 78 high schools from the 1992/95 period with extremely weak promoting power. Figure 3b shows the distribution of ninth graders with different risk factors for dropping out in Philadelphia's 22 neighborhood high schools. Both figures highlight the high degree of educational difficulty which these schools face. In the 15 Philadelphia high schools with weak promoting power, for example, no more than 15% of the ninth graders are first time ninth graders who have not been held back in earlier graders and have math and reading levels at the seventh grade level or higher. The overwhelming majority of ninth graders in these schools are repeaters, over-age for the grade, in special education, and/or have reading and math skills more than two grades below grade level. Each of these is well-documented risk factor for dropping out and calls for a tailored and sustained research-based intervention (ETS 1995). Presently, however, these schools and within them the ninth grade are tremendously under-resourced for the task they face, often having to make due with first time, uncertified, or out of field teachers, insufficient teaching materials, and weak administrative capacity (Neild and Balfanz 2001, Balfanz 2000).

A second important finding with policy implications is that urban minorities are disproportionately found in high schools with weak promoting power and by inference high drop-out rates. Across the thirty five cities examined during the period form 1992 to 1995 in two out of three cases if a high school was large (more than 900 students) and attended almost exclusively by minority students (90% or more) it had weak promoting power. The social and economic ramifications of congregating large segments of the urban minority population in low performing high schools with significant drop out rates are considerable to say the least. One advantage of the promoting power measure, in this regard, is that it could be used, along with measures of academic achievement, as an across-district and across-state accountability indicator for the quality and effectiveness of the high schools attended predominately by minority students.

A third important point which emerges from this analysis is that the variability across districts indicates that while high numbers and concentrations of high schools with weak promoting power are likely a significant source of urban drop-outs, it would be a mistake to focus all drop-out prevention efforts exclusively on schools with weak promoting power. A number of the districts which had only a few high schools that had half as many or fewer seniors than freshmen still reported significant drop-out rates during the time periods analyzed (Council of Great City Schools 1994). More than anything this shows the importance of finding ways to examine drop-out rates at both the district and school level. Simply using district rates tends to create the impression of general uniformity across urban districts which this school level analysis has shown not to be the case. Clearly additional investigation is needed to examine how the organization of high schooling differs between districts with similar drop-out rates but different numbers and concentrations of high schools with weak promoting power.

It also will be important to extend the analysis of promoting power beyond the 35 largest central cities in order to achieve a more complete understanding of the number and distribution of urban high schools that may have a significant drop-out rate. There are an unknown number of medium size cities like Newark and St. Louis that have high concentrations of high schools with weak promoting power, as well as a number of smaller cities like Benton Harbor, Michigan where the only high school in the district has fewer than half as many seniors as freshmen.

Finally, the analysis suggests that major inroads could be made into reducing the urban and minority drop-our rate if between 200 to 300 schools located primarily in 20 to 25 cities are transformed from failing high schools into strong and transformative learning institutions. Reforming, redesigning, and dramatically improving 300 high schools is a considerable challenge but it is not beyond the bounds of human agency. It would, however, entail a far greater concentration of both human and financial resources in a relatively small number of districts than is currently being contemplated on the state and federal level. It also would require sustained application of our emerging knowledge of effective and sustainable whole school and district-wide reform at the secondary level, as well the continued development of this understanding. This body of research indicates that particular attention will have to be paid to providing low performing schools with a) the tools they need to improve i.e. research based and practice validated organizational strategies that increase student engagement with schooling, attendance, and productive behaviors, instructional practices and curriculums which can help students with weak academic skills to catch up etc, b) enhanced administrative capacity and increased administrative will, c) a permanent infrastructure of teacher support (i.e.on-going subject and curriculum specific professional development, sustained in-classroom implementation assistance for peer coaches etc.) .), d) a re-conceptualization of teachers work and their role in urban secondary high schools, and e) an improved understanding of process by which large number of students fail multiple courses and how current organizational and instructional practices often actively manufacture low achievement (Legters 2000, Jordan, McPartland, Legters, and Balfanz 2000, Balfanz 2000). The potential social and economic return to dramatically transforming these 300 urban high schools, and the continued high costs of the status quo suggest that creating strong urban high schools should be a central area of state and federal policy and support in the years to come.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper strongly suggests that about half of the high schools in the nation's 35 largest cities have severe dropout rates. It further shows that high schools with weak promoting power and by implication high dropout rates are found in almost all of the largest cities but they are particularly concentrated in Midwestern and Northern industrial cities and Texas. In these districts more than half of the high school students attend schools in which the senior class has 50% or fewer members than the entering class three or four years earlier. Finally, it indicates that high schools with high dropout rates in urban America are disproportionately attended by minorities. Two-thirds of the 200 or so large high schools that are attended almost entirely by minority students in the nation's 35 largest cities have weak or very weak promoting power.

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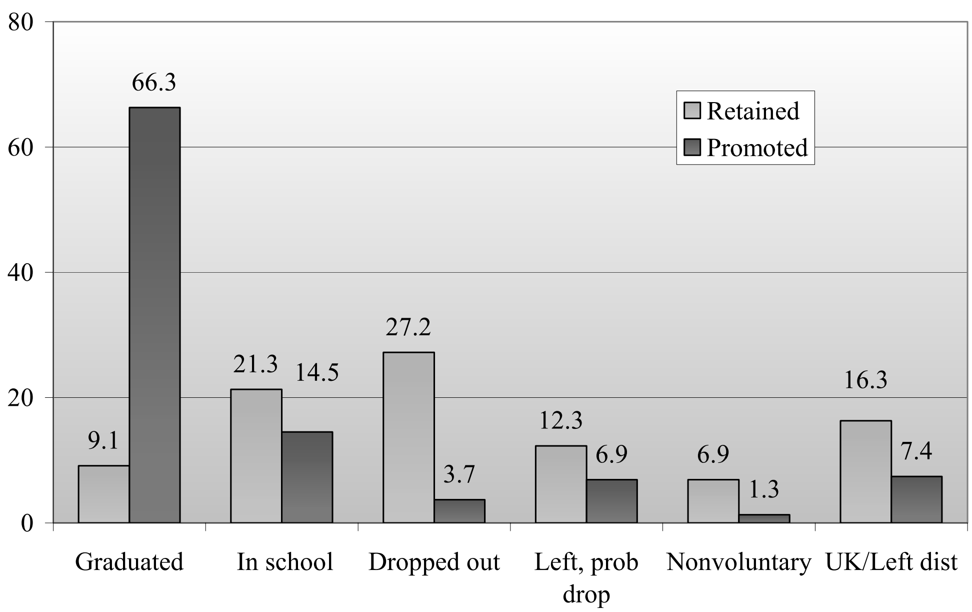
Table 1. Enrollment History of the Baltimore City High School Class of 1997

	9th Grade 1993/94	10th Grade 1994/95	11th Grade 1995/96	12th Grade 1996/97	Graduates June 1997	Graduates, as % of 12th Grade	Graduates, as % of 9th Grade
Non-Selective High Schools (9)	6405	3188	2201	1853	1689	29%	26%
Selective High Schools (5)	1338	1228	1114	1054	1019	78%	76%
Vocational Schools (3)	1341	1105	940	797	695	59%	52%
Alternative High Schools (4)	535	484	319	362	333	68%	62%
Total	9619	6005	4574	4066	3736	42%	39%

Figure 1. Philadelphia High School Student Locations, June 2000, by 9th Grade Promotion Status, June 1997*



*Based on 20% sample.
Source: Neild, 2000.

Table 2. Number of Schools with a Promoting Power less than 50%, by Year, Size and Minority Concentration in 35 Largest Cities*

*34 of 35 Cities w/ Population >= 400,000 (excluding Los Angeles).

	# of Schools in Sample	# of Schools with PP < 50%	% of Schools with PP < 50%
89/90-92/92 All Schools	**603**	**236**	**39.1%**
Schools with a Population > 900	**506**	**203**	**40%**
Schools with a Population > 900 & 50% + Minority	**419**	**194**	**47%**
Schools with a Population > 900 & 90%+ Minority	**199**	**126**	**62%**
92/93-95/96 All Schools	**602**	**285**	**47%**
Schools with a Population >900	**512**	**250**	**49%**
Schools with a Population > 900 & 50%+ Minority	**433**	**235**	**54%**
Schools with a Population > 900 & 90%+ Minority	**215**	**148**	**69%**

Figure 2a. Percent Fewer 12th Graders than 9th/10th Graders by Decile: Class of 1993 in the 35 Largest Cities*

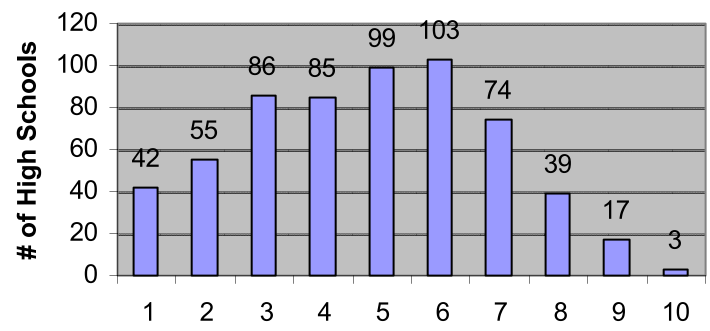


Figure 2b. Percent Fewer 12th Graders Than 9th/10th Graders by Decile: Class of 1996 in the 35 Largest Cities*

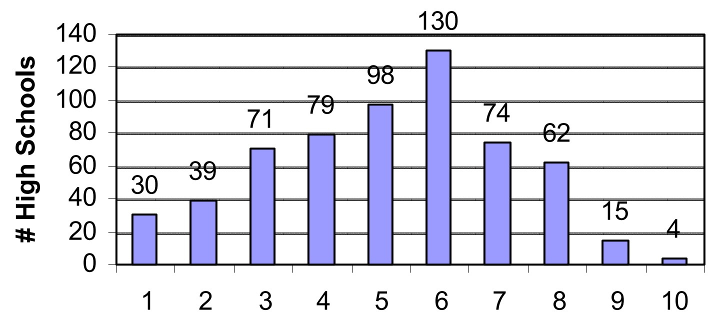


Table 3a. Number and Percent of Sampled High Schools with a Promoting Power Less Than 50% by District: Class of 1993

SCHOOL DISTRICT	Total # of Sampled High Schools	# of Sampled High Schools w/PP <50%	% of Sampled High Schools w/PP <50%
CLEVELAND CITY SD	14	13.00	92.86
INDIANAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS	7	6.00	85.71
DETROIT CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT	22	18.00	81.82
SAN ANTONIO ISD	8	6.00	75.00
BALTIMORE CITY	16	11.00	68.75
FORT WORTH ISD	12	8.00	66.67
DALLAS ISD	24	14.00	58.33
HOUSTON ISD	26	15.00	57.69
CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST	62	34.00	54.84
NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	108	52.00	48.15
COLUMBUS CITY SD	15	7.00	46.67
PHILADELPHIA CITY SD	33	15.00	45.45
AUSTIN ISD	10	4.00	40.00
KANSAS CITY	8	3.00	37.50
ORLEANS PARISH SCHOOL BOARD	17	6.00	35.29
MILWAUKEE SCH DIST	15	5.00	33.33
NASHVILLE-DAVIDSON COUNTY SD	12	4.00	33.33
DENVER COUNTY	10	3.00	30.00
MEMPHIS CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT	26	4.00	15.38
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUB SCHLS	15	2.00	13.33
EL PASO ISD	8	1.00	12.50
OKLA CITY	8	1.00	12.50
PORTLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT	10	1.00	10.00
SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED	12	1.00	8.33
BOSTON SCHOOL DISTRICT	15	1.00	6.67
SAN DIEGO CITY UNIFIED	17	1.00	5.88
DUVAL COUNTY SCH DIST (Jacksonville)	16	.00	.00
LONG BEACH UNIFIED	5	.00	.00
MECKLENBURG COUNTY (Charlotte)	10	.00	.00
PHOENIX UHS DISTRICT	8	.00	.00
SAN JOSE UNIFIED	6	.00	.00
SEATTLE SCHOOL DISTRICT	10	.00	.00
TUCSON UNIFIED DISTRICT	10	.00	.00
VIRGINIA BEACH	8	.00	.00

Table 3b. Number and Percent of Sampled High Schools with a Promoting Power Less Than 50% by District: Class of 1996

SCHOOL DISTRICT	Total # of Sampled High Schools	# of Sampled High Schools w/PP <50%	% of Sampled High Schools w/PP <50%
AUSTIN ISD	10	6.00	60.00
BALTIMORE CITY	16	9.00	56.25
BOSTON SCHOOL DISTRICT	15	1.00	6.67
CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST	61	36.00	59.02
CLEVELAND CITY SD	13	5.00	38.46
COLUMBUS CITY SD	17	11.00	64.71
DALLAS ISD	24	18.00	75.00
DENVER COUNTY	10	5.00	50.00
DETROIT CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT	22	17.00	77.27
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUB SCHLS	15	5.00	33.33
DUVAL COUNTY SCH DIST (Jacksonville)	18	5.00	27.78
EL PASO ISD	8	7.00	87.50
FORT WORTH ISD	11	6.00	54.55
HOUSTON ISD	25	18.00	72.00
INDIANAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS	5	5.00	100.00
KANSAS CITY	10	3.00	30.00
LONG BEACH UNIFIED	6	.00	.00
MECKLENBURG COUNTY (Charlotte)	11	1.00	9.09
MEMPHIS CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT	27	4.00	14.81
MILWAUKEE SCH DIST	15	11.00	73.33
NASHVILLE-DAVIDSON COUNTY SD	13	4.00	30.77
NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	100	64.00	64.00
OKLA CITY	8	4.00	50.00
ORLEANS PARISH SCHOOL BOARD	18	4.00	22.22
PHILADELPHIA CITY SD	33	22.00	66.67
PHOENIX UNION HIGH SCH DIST	8	.00	.00
PORTLAND SCH DIST	10	2.00	20.00
SAN ANTONIO ISD	8	6.00	75.00
SAN DIEGO CITY UNIFIED	18	2.00	11.11
SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED	12	1.00	8.33
SAN JOSE UNIFIED	6	.00	.00
SEATTLE SCHOOL DISTRICT	10	.00	.00
TUCSON UNIFIED DISTRICT	10	3.00	30.00
VIRGINIA BEACH CITY PUBLIC SCH	9	.00	.00

Table 4a. Percent of Total and Minority Students Attending Sampled High Schools with Promoting Power Less Than 50% by District: Class of 1993

SCHOOL DISTRICT	% Total Students Attending Sampled H.S. w/PP<50%	% Minority Students Attending Sampled H.S. w/PP<50%
CLEVELAND CITY SD	90.32	90.18
INDIANAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS	87.95	90.82
DETROIT CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT	80.81	80.47
SAN ANTONIO ISD	80.03	79.51
BALTIMORE CITY	72.14	71.15
HOUSTON ISD	62.71	66.57
FORT WORTH ISD	62.52	72.37
DALLAS ISD	57.97	61.21
COLUMBUS CITY SD	52.99	51.99
PHILADELPHIA CITY SD	51.60	56.17
CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST	49.86	54.09
NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	44.65	50.53
ORLEANS PARISH SCHOOL BOARD	39.83	41.48
AUSTIN ISD	38.53	47.25
MILWAUKEE SCH DIST	33.95	34.87
DENVER COUNTY	33.53	43.02
NASHVILLE-DAVIDSON COUNTY SD	33.09	40.3
KANSAS CITY	31.23	31.03
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUB SCHLS	17.45	13.73
EL PASO ISD	13.04	12.9
MEMPHIS CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT	12.31	14.08
PORTLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT	8.38	18.09
OKLA CITY	8.03	11.6
SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED	6.43	6.98
BOSTON SCHOOL DISTRICT	6.06	7.03
SAN DIEGO CITY UNIFIED	6.01	8.25
DUVAL COUNTY SCH DIST (Jacksonville)	.00	.00
LONG BEACH UNIFIED	.00	.00
MECKLENBURG COUNTY (Charlotte)	.00	.00
PHOENIX UHS DISTRICT	.00	.00
SAN JOSE UNIFIED	.00	.00
SEATTLE SCHOOL DISTRICT	.00	.00
TUCSON UNIFIED DISTRICT	.00	.00
VIRGINIA BEACH	.00	.00

Table 4b. Percent of Total and Minority Students Attending Sampled High Schools with Promoting Power Less Than 50% by District: Class of 1996

SCHOOL DISTRICT	% Total Students Attending Sampled H.S. w/PP <50%	% Minority Students Attending Sampled H.S. w/PP <50%
INDIANAPOLIS PUBLIC SCHOOLS	100.00	100
EL PASO ISD	84.97	88.93
DALLAS ISD	79.53	80.02
MILWAUKEE SCH DIST	78.82	80.89
HOUSTON ISD	76.37	80.19
DETROIT CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT	74.60	73.99
SAN ANTONIO ISD	74.13	73.56
PHILADELPHIA CITY SD	72.68	80.63
COLUMBUS CITY SD	67.18	65.51
NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS	62.38	66.9
BALTIMORE CITY	60.86	60.78
AUSTIN ISD	55.43	66.24
CITY OF CHICAGO SCHOOL DIST	51.71	56.06
DENVER COUNTY	50.86	57.83
FORT WORTH ISD	47.91	55.6
OKLA CITY	47.77	46.96
CLEVELAND CITY SD	36.52	41.12
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUB SCHLS	34.27	35.04
NASHVILLE-DAVIDSON COUNTY SD	32.61	35.2
TUCSON UNIFIED DISTRICT	31.81	43.76
KANSAS CITY	29.73	30.05
DUVAL COUNTY SCH DIST (Jacksonville)	25.90	32.41
ORLEANS PARISH SCHOOL BOARD	20.56	21.88
PORTLAND SCH DIST	17.46	29.22
SAN DIEGO CITY UNIFIED	10.91	14.02
MEMPHIS CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT	9.37	11.21
MECKLENBURG COUNTY (Charlotte)	8.49	10.36
SAN FRANCISCO UNIFIED	6.98	7.67
BOSTON SCHOOL DISTRICT	3.90	4.74
LONG BEACH UNIFIED	0	0
PHOENIX UNION HIGH SCH DIST	0	0
SAN JOSE UNIFIED	0	0
SEATTLE SCHOOL DISTRICT	0	0
VIRGINIA BEACH CITY PUBLIC SCH	0	0

Table 5. Percentage of Students by Race/Ethnicity who Attend High Schools with Promoting Power of 50% or Less from 9th/10th to 12th Grades in 35 Largest Cities*

1989/90 – 1992/93	% in Total Sample	% in 50%+ Schools
Native American	< 1%	< 1%
Asian	7%	3%
Black	45%	56%
Hispanic	24%	29%
White	24%	12%
1992/93 – 1995/96		
Native American	< 1%	< 1%
Asian	8%	4%
Black	44%	52%
Hispanic	25%	30%
White	23%	14%

*34 of 35 Cities with population >= 400,000 (excluding Los Angeles)

Table 6. Percentage of Total Students in Each Race/Ethnicity Category Who Attend High Schools with Promoting Power of 50% or Less from 9th/10th to 12th Grades in 35 Largest Cities*

1989/90 – 1992/93	
Native American	25%
Asian	16%
Black	49%
Hispanic	48%
White	19%
1992/93 – 1995/96	
Native American	38%
Asian	24%
Black	60%
Hispanic	60%
White	29%

*34 of 35 Cities with population >= 400,000 (excluding Los Angeles

Figure 3a.
Characteristics of a High School with Extremely Weak Promoting Power –

Southern High School, Baltimore, MD 1996-1997

Total Enrollment	1,407
Ave. Daily 9th Grade Attendance	69%
% of Students Missing More than 20 days per year	74%
Entrants/Withdrawals	159/459
% of 9th Grade Students Passing 7th Grade Functional Math Test	35%
Number of 9th Graders	669
Number of 10th Graders	350
Number of 11th Graders	255
Number of 12th Graders	133
Number of 9th graders in 1993/94	670
% Fewer 12th graders in 1996/97 than 9th graders 1993/94	80%

Figure 3b.
Twenty-Two Neighborhood High Schools in Philadelphia