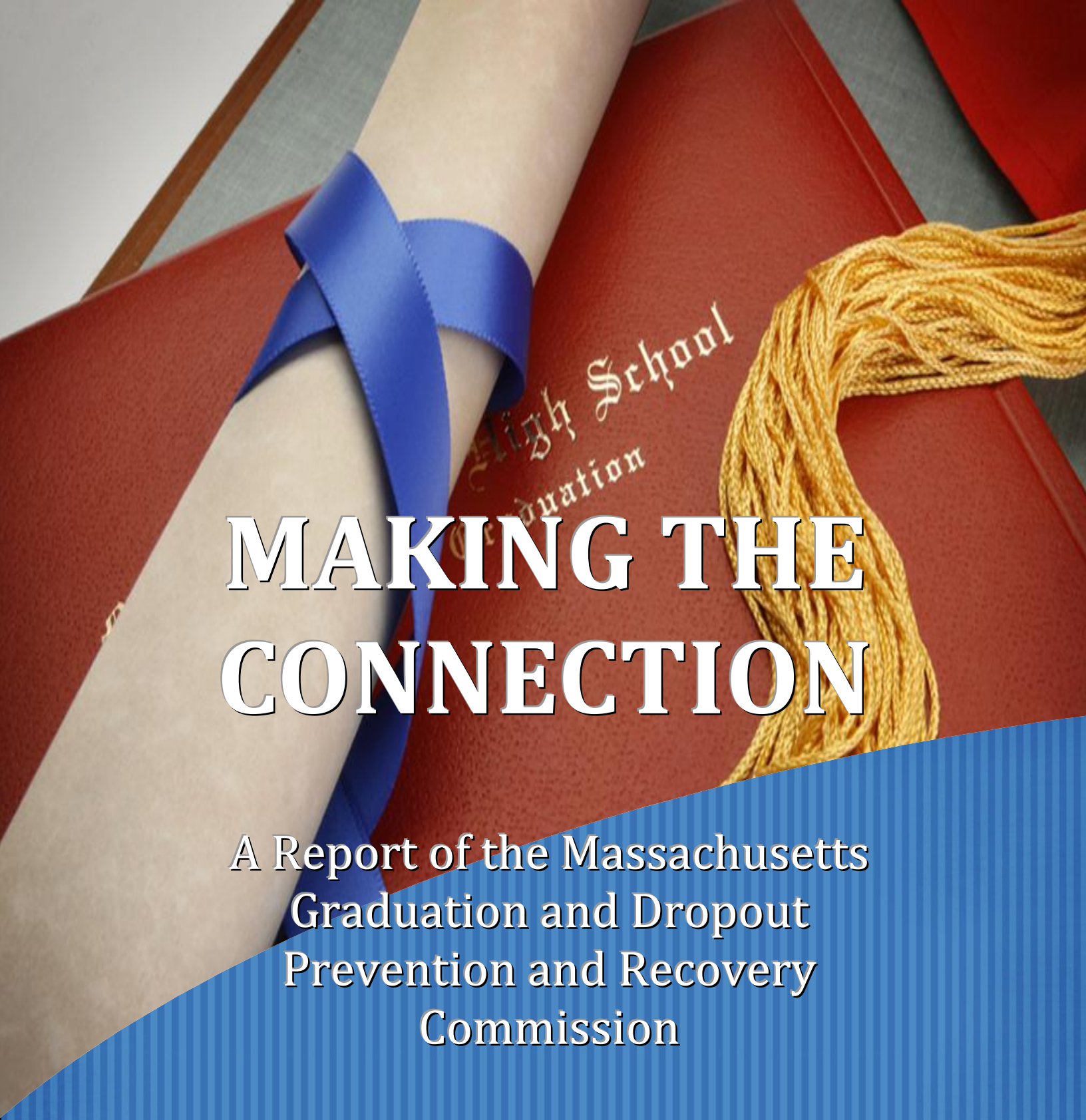

MAKING THE CONNECTION

A Report of the Massachusetts Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission

October 2009

CONTENTS

LETTER FROM SECRETARY REVILLE 1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2

INTRODUCTION 6

COMMISSION FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 12

NEW STATEWIDE EXPECTATIONS 12
EARLY IDENTIFICATION 14
EFFECTIVE PREVENTION, INTERVENTION, AND RECOVERY STRATEGIES 15
RESPONSIVE REFORMS AND BUDGET PRIORITIES 21

CONCLUSION 29

APPENDIX A: ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION AND OTHER EDUCATION PATHWAYS 30
APPENDIX B: COMMISSION MEMBERS 33
APPENDIX C: RELATED RESOURCES 34

LETTER FROM SECRETARY REVILLE

Dear Fellow Citizens:

I am pleased to present *Making the Connection: A Report of the Massachusetts Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission*. The analysis and recommendations offered within this report represent the commitment and expertise of Commission members and the many practitioners, policy-makers, and citizens who informed this thoughtful process.

In Massachusetts, our public education system gives us much to celebrate and be proud of. Our students outperform many of their peers on national and international assessments, reflecting our rigorous standards and high expectations. Yet, some of our students face significant challenges, and our failure to reach them and equip them for the future cannot be ignored.

Each year, approximately 10,000 students drop out of school across the Commonwealth; most of these young people will never reach their full potential. This is a personal tragedy for those students and their families, and a significant loss for our economy as well.

We can no longer tolerate the dropout crisis, nor can we remain passive observers when we have the capacity to change the course of these students' futures. We have the tools to identify students who are at risk of dropping out, and successful prevention, intervention, and dropout recovery strategies to learn from and replicate.

We must demonstrate our commitment to preventing students from dropping out in the future – and welcoming back students who have left school without a diploma – by offering learning environments that promote academic excellence and provide students with the teaching, support, and guidance they require to become engaged lifelong learners and productive and fulfilled citizens. The work of this Commission will help guide policy and practice at every level, and the recommendations and action steps identified in this report form a comprehensive and integrated strategy to attack the dropout crisis on multiple fronts.

As we launch into the next chapter of education reform, we must attend to all students to ensure that they meet the minimum requirement for a successful future: high school graduation. We must challenge our conventional assumptions and traditional practices and really do things differently if we expect different outcomes—and we must expect different outcomes. Massachusetts has long been at the forefront of innovation and educational excellence, and I have every reason to believe that this urgent call to action to address the dropout crisis will be met with vigorous efforts to ensure that all students are given the opportunity to succeed in school and beyond.

Sincerely,

Paul Reville
Secretary of Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"It is important to find teachers that you are comfortable with. Some teachers care, some teachers don't give up on you. These are teachers that motivate…Good teachers are those that are supportive and patient and understand kids."

"There are so many other things going on [in my personal life] besides school – school is not a priority."

"Faculty dismisses acting-out, doing poorly as just 'it is what it is'… they don't investigate why students are like that."

These are the voices of Massachusetts high school dropouts, the voices of young people who will likely never reach their full potential.[1] They represent the approximately 10,000 Massachusetts students who leave school every year before earning a diploma. Rather than contributing to society, studies show that these young people are more likely to be dependent on others to get by.[2] They are less likely to have a job, marry, and vote in elections. They are more likely to spend time behind bars and depend on public assistance.

The moral dimensions of the state's dropout crisis are obvious: no young person deserves to have his or her future determined by circumstance or before receiving meaningful chances to succeed. Moreover, Massachusetts dropout rates are disproportionately high among Hispanic and African-American students, limited English proficient students, special education students, and students from low-income families. These gaps are persistent and show no signs of waning.

The competitive nature of today's rapidly changing global economy makes even the best educated and resourced among us wonder what success will require in the coming years. For those struggling at the bottom tier of the economic pyramid, survival in a knowledge-based, high-skills job market is a daunting prospect. Gone are the days when a vibrant manufacturing sector helped provide a middle class standard of living for individuals without a high school diploma. This is especially the case in Massachusetts, where most new jobs require specialized skills and at least two years of postsecondary education.[3]

The implications of the dropout crisis are broader and deeper than one bad choice on the part of an individual student; there are also significant economic implications for local communities and our state as a whole. The state's ability to attract and retain employers is inextricably linked to the success of every worker – and the success of every student. No

---

[1] *Youth Voices—How High Schools can Respond to the Needs of Students and Help Prevent Dropouts.* (2007). Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

[2] *Social and Fiscal Consequences of the Dropout Crisis.* (2007). Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University.

[3] *Commonwealth of Massachusetts Employment Projections 2006-2016.* Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

one is expendable. When we shortchange children, we endanger our state's economic competitiveness and quality of life. In order to sustain our knowledge-based economy, we must retain talent and ensure that all of our students have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

In August 2008, Governor Deval Patrick signed into law an *Act to Improve Dropout Prevention and Reporting of Graduation Rates*. Among its provisions was the creation of a commission – the Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission – to survey dropout prevention and recovery best practices and programs nationwide and to identify promising practices currently in use in the Commonwealth. The Commission was comprised of highly experienced legislators and professionals from a cross-section of education, workforce development, and health and human services agencies and organizations. This report details findings and recommendations regarding the specific topic areas cited in the Commission's charge.

New Statewide Expectations

One directive for the Commission was to establish a goal and timeline for reducing the statewide dropout rate. The Commission – guided by Massachusetts' characteristically aggressive approach to education reform and the Governor's target of at least 90 percent of students graduating from high school prepared for postsecondary education by 2020 – recommended that we commit to ***reducing the dropout rate by half over the next five years***.

In order to achieve this reduction – ***from 3.4 percent to 1.7 percent by 2014*** – the Commission offers a comprehensive set of recommended strategies based on the topic areas included in the Commission's charge and drawn from members' experiences and expertise, testimony from public hearings, and existing initiatives across the state and nation.

Early Identification

Dropping out of school results from a long process of disengagement that usually begins even before a student reaches high school. There is no one-size-fits-all combination of risk factors that can be generalized across student populations; however, research suggests a number of early indicators that can help predict which students are most likely to drop out of school.

Identification of students at risk of dropping out enables education leaders at every level to develop an appropriate array of interventions – from additional learning supports and time to social worker assistance and behavioral health strategies. The Commission recommends ***expanding the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Early Indicator pilot*** to provide early indicator data for all districts and at earlier grade levels. The Commission also suggests that ***youth-serving state agencies continue to work toward data-sharing agreements*** that may provide a more complete picture of student needs.

Effective Prevention, Interventions, and Recovery

According to the research findings, perspectives vary on the root cause of dropping out of high school.[4] Superintendents and other school leaders cite academic challenges, personal and family issues, and the need for employment as dropout drivers; these drivers are often viewed as personal and outside of the school's sphere of influence. Students themselves report a lack of connection to adults or their school as a leading reason for disengaging from school. Other important reasons students cite include feeling too far behind to catch up, boredom, lack of academic support, and a general feeling of being overwhelmed.

The Commission's recommendations include specific strategies for dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery that align with national research on effective approaches, which suggests:

- **Targeting interventions** to individual students, such as increased adult attention and supervision, increased academic support, wrap-around services, and advisories; some school districts have begun using an approach that features a "coach" who organizes interventions for at-risk students;

- **Connecting school to college and career** by providing internships, career explorations, or mentoring programs;

- **Active recovery** that includes reaching out to dropouts and providing them with support and alternative pathways to graduation; and

- **Providing alternatives to traditional high schools** that may feature benefits such as smaller class sizes, coaches or case managers who provide increased support, competency-based instruction, accelerated credit recovery, and access to social services.

The Commission recognizes that school districts cannot be expected to pursue these aggressive prevention and recovery strategies alone; a collaborative approach that engages local and regional stakeholders will strengthen efforts to reduce the dropout rate. Regional dropout prevention and recovery coalitions – which can be convened by workforce investment boards through their youth councils – should include school officials, state and municipal agencies, and community organizations.

Responsive Reforms and Budget Priorities

What became clear from data and public testimony is that new expectations for school attendance and attainment are imperative: All Massachusetts students must stay in school

---

[4] Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, Jr., J.J. and Morison, K.M. (2006) *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Civic Enterprises; *Too Big To Be Seen: the Invisible Dropout Crisis in Boston and America.* (2006). Boston Private Industry Council; *Youth Voices—How High Schools can Respond to the Needs of Students and Help Prevent Dropouts.* (2007). Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

until they graduate with a diploma and ideally, move successfully into postsecondary education. To ensure that policy is consistent with and supportive of this expectation of educational attainment for all students, ***the Commission recommends increasing the age for compulsory education from 16 to 18 years old*** through a phased-in approach that includes the strategies necessary to deliver on heightened expectations.

The simple act of increasing the compulsory age, taken by itself, will only retain a handful of students. In order for this policy to be effective, we must be prepared to offer programs and services that address the underlying reasons that students drop out of school. At the same time, we must insist on effective enforcement of the law to underscore for schools, students, and families the importance of staying in school and earning a diploma.

Other existing policies must be re-examined in the present context and revised to reflect the critical importance of educational attainment and, at the very least, obtaining a high school diploma. Many current education policies are vestiges of another time, a time when it was possible for someone to earn a family-supporting wage without a high school diploma; when children played a larger role in the economies of their communities and their families; and when discipline focused more on exclusion than intervention. For example, in addition to allowing students to voluntarily leave school at age 16, state law permits 14- and 15-year-old students to be granted permission to leave school for physical or medical reasons, employment, or to engage in non-wage work at home. In addition, public school districts are not required to educate expelled students.

In these dire economic times, we cannot afford to be complacent. All students must graduate from a Commonwealth high school with a diploma in hand, prepared to succeed in college or career. In this report, the Commission lays out a strategy to do just that. In five years, we will halve the Commonwealth's dropout rate through evidence-based strategies in the areas of early identification; effective prevention, intervention, and recovery; and responsive reforms and budget priorities. Together, we will solve the dropout crisis by ensuring that every child has the supports and opportunities he or she needs to succeed in school and beyond.

GRADUATION AND DROPOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY COMMISSION REPORT

"You can feel like just another number in a big school."

"It is important to find teachers that you are comfortable with. Some teachers care, some teachers don't give up on you. These are teachers that motivate…Good teachers are those that are supportive and patient and understand kids."

"There are so many other things going on [in my personal life] besides school – school is not a priority."

"Faculty dismisses acting-out, doing poorly as just 'it is what it is'… they don't investigate why students are like that."

"[I dropped out] not 'cause school was hard… I just didn't like the atmosphere."

INTRODUCTION

These are the voices of Massachusetts high school dropouts, the voices of young people who will likely never reach their full potential.[5] They represent the approximately 10,000 Massachusetts students[6] who leave school every year before earning a diploma. Rather than contributing to society, studies show that these young people are more likely to be dependent on others to get by.[7] They are less likely to have a job, marry, and vote in elections. They are more likely to spend time behind bars and depend on public assistance.

The moral dimensions of the state's dropout crisis are obvious: no young person deserves to have his or her future determined by circumstance or before receiving meaningful chances to succeed. However, there are also significant economic implications of dropping out of school – for individual young people and their families, as well as for communities and our entire state.

The competitive nature of today's rapidly changing global economy makes even the best educated and resourced among us wonder what success will require in the coming years. For those struggling at the bottom tier of the economic pyramid, survival in a knowledge-based, high-skills job market is a daunting prospect. Gone are the days when a vibrant

[5] *Youth Voices—How High Schools can Respond to the Needs of Students and Help Prevent Dropouts.* (2007). Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

[6] Data obtained from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. For more information about dropout data for the state, individual districts, and student subgroups as well as the methodology for the dropout calculations, visit the ESE's website at: http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout/

[7] *Social and Fiscal Consequences of the Dropout Crisis.* (2007). Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University.

manufacturing sector helped provide a middle class standard of living for individuals without a high school diploma. This is especially the case in Massachusetts, where most new jobs require specialized skills and at least two years of postsecondary education.[8]

In a February 2009 address to a joint session of Congress, President Obama framed the problem in broad national terms: "Dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It's not just quitting on yourself; it's quitting on your country – and this country needs and values the talents of every American." Massachusetts has always answered the nation's call to action with innovation and bold leadership. The dropout crisis is another such moment. We can make a profound difference for young Americans in Massachusetts and we can help map a new route to success in this era of changing economic fortunes.

The state's position as an education reform leader – and our comparative advantages and successes – do not provide excuses for inaction. From state government to individual teachers to students, families, and communities across the state, there is an understanding among education stakeholders in Massachusetts that doing well isn't good enough.

Of particular concern are persistent achievement and attainment gaps among different groups of students. Massachusetts dropout rates are disproportionately high among Hispanic and African-American students, limited English proficient students, special education students, and students from low-income families. According to data released by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, during the 2007-2008 school year Hispanic and African American students continued to leave school at much higher rates than their White and Asian peers (8.3 percent and 5.8 percent versus 2.2 percent and 2 percent, respectively). Similar differences in dropout rates exist among limited English proficient students (8.8 percent), special education students (5.5 percent), and general education students (3 percent). Disparities persist among different income levels, with low income students exhibiting a dropout rate nearly twice that of non-low income students (5.5 percent versus 2.6 percent).[9]

The Implications for Massachusetts

The implications of the dropout crisis are broader and deeper than one bad choice on the part of an individual student. The state's ability to attract and retain employers is inextricably linked to the success of every worker – and the success of every student. No one is expendable. Last century's batch processing approach to education – when educational attainment was distributed based on the traditional bell curve – is fundamentally at odds with the economic and social demands of the 21st century. When we shortchange children, we endanger our state's economic competitiveness and quality of

---

[8] *Commonwealth of Massachusetts Employment Projections 2006-2016.* Massachusetts Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

[9] Data obtained from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. For more information about dropout data for the state, individual districts, and student subgroups as well as the methodology for the dropout calculations, visit the ESE's website at: http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout/

Difference in Lifetime Earnings

Over the course of lifetime, the average dropout will make $456,000 less than a high school graduate. The earnings gap between a dropout and a college graduate is far greater - approximately $1.5 million.

life. In order to sustain our knowledge-based economy, we must retain talent and ensure that all of our students have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

In 2007, Andrew Sum and the staff of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University outlined several consequences of the dropout crisis specific to Massachusetts, which include both social and fiscal costs to our state. Some of those consequences are as follows:

- **Dropouts are less likely to have a job and those who do earn less, on average, than high school graduates.** Roughly half (55 percent) of Massachusetts dropouts ages 16 to 64 were employed in 2005, compared with three-quarters (74 percent) of high school graduates. Dropouts who were employed earned almost $10,000 less per year, on average, than high school graduates.

- **Massachusetts dropouts are less likely to have health insurance than those with more education, and are more likely to depend on Medicaid or Medicare for their coverage.** Only 20 percent of all Massachusetts dropouts had health insurance coverage through an employer. Over half of all Massachusetts dropouts have publicly funded health care through Medicaid or Medicare.

- **Dropouts are more likely to depend on public assistance.** Over one quarter (27 percent) of Massachusetts dropouts were dependent on cash public assistance of some kind, compared with 15 percent of high school graduates and seven percent of bachelor's degree holders.

- **Dropouts, especially young men and young Black men, are more likely to be incarcerated.** Twice as many male dropouts than high school graduates were incarcerated in 2000. Dropouts make up the majority (70 percent) of jail and prison populations in Massachusetts. Further, according to some estimates, juvenile offenders who become career criminals incur millions of dollars over a lifetime in public costs associated with emergency response, investigation, and criminal justice.[10]

In addition to the consequences faced by individuals who drop out, the problem affects the rest of society. Over his or her lifetime, the average high school dropout in Massachusetts will impose a net fiscal burden of nearly $118,124 in cash and other benefits (such as food stamps, healthcare, childcare, and housing subsidies) on state and federal taxpayers. In comparison, the average high school *graduate* will contribute $319,043 more in taxes than he or she will receive from the state and federal government in the form of subsidies and

[10] Cohen, M. & Piquero, A.R. (2008). New evidence about The Monetary Value of Saving a High Risk Youth. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 14 (1): 5-33.

services. Therefore, the gap between the fiscal impact of a high school graduate and a high school dropout is $437,167.[11]

The Legislative Charge for the Commission

In August 2008, Governor Deval Patrick signed into law an *Act to Improve Dropout Prevention and Reporting of Graduation Rates*. Among its provisions was the creation of a commission – the Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission – to survey dropout prevention and recovery best practices nationwide and to identify promising programs currently in use in the Commonwealth. The Legislature directed the Commission to provide findings and recommendations on the following ten specific topic areas:

- Setting a goal and timeline for reducing the statewide annual dropout rate;
- Further developing early indicator systems to identify students who are at risk of dropping out, or who are not likely to graduate on time from high school without receiving additional support, and school policies that exacerbate dropping out;
- Expanding the definition of "structured learning time" to include internships and work-study programs and exploring ways to encourage school districts to incorporate quality internships and work and learning programs into structured learning time to engage all students in relevant and rigorous curricula;
- Developing a reimbursement mechanism for districts sending students to Alternative Education programs;
- Exploring the connection between school discipline policies and students' level of engagement in or alienation from school, with emphasis on school referrals for discipline purposes and court-involved youth;
- Providing financial incentives for districts that are effective in graduating at-risk students and recovering high school dropouts;
- Raising the compulsory attendance age from 16 years of age to 18 years of age;
- Creating a dropout prevention and recovery grant program to:
    - Provide school districts with funds to implement early indicator systems;
    - Create capacity within regions by engaging local workforce investment boards for outreach to dropouts and referral to local school districts and Alternative Education programs; or

[11] *Social and Fiscal Consequences of the Dropout Crisis.* (Updated, 2009). Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University.

- Provide funds to local districts or nonprofit programs to develop alternative routes to a diploma or its equivalent to prevent students from dropping out and to meet the needs of those returning to education;

❖ District activities in compliance with Section 18 of Chapter 76 of the Massachusetts General Laws and any regulations or administrative directives of the department regarding required and appropriate measures to identify, locate, interview, and counsel high school drop-outs; provided, however, that the commission shall also make recommendations regarding mandatory reporting by districts on activities in fulfillment of statutory requirements and administrative directives; and

❖ Establishing a threshold annual dropout rate for each school district such that rates in excess of threshold levels would establish a mandatory requirement on districts to adopt and implement a district-wide action plan to reduce dropout rates and effectively track students.

The legislation also specified that the Commission's recommendations regarding the standards and requirements for such action plans shall include:

- An outreach and referral strategy;
- A comprehensive listing of Alternative Education options and other pathways to earn a diploma offered within the public school system (see Appendix A);
- Plans for collaboration with teams of community stakeholders including, but not limited to, workforce investment boards through their youth and adult learning centers to develop a comprehensive approach to address the dropout issue; and
- Alternative options to enable students who have dropped out to return and receive a high school diploma, including options delivered directly by the public school district or by nonprofit organizations approved by the public schools.

The Commission was chaired by Secretary of Education Paul Reville and received significant contribution from Secretary of Labor and Workforce Development Suzanne Bump, the commissioners of education and other state agencies, and leaders of the State Legislature. Additional members of the Commission included highly experienced professionals from a cross-section of education, workforce, and health and human services organizations (see Appendix B for a full listing of Commission members). Commission members integrated the latest thinking on the subject of dropout prevention and recovery with their own powerful observations and areas of expertise.

Per the requirements in the legislation, the Commission hosted three public hearings to garner input from a variety of constituents. A total of 150 people attended the hearings, with over 50 providing testimony. Many of those giving testimony pointed to the urgency and complexity of the dropout problem. Others commented that the dropout problem facing the state is a community-wide challenge that requires a community-wide coordinated response to include social, medical, and health services. Additional comments focused on the need to increase educational options such as alternative education and

multiple educational pathways and to develop effective student recovery programs for those who have dropped out. One significant theme that emerged from the public hearings was the lack of state and local funding to develop alternative programs and multiple educational pathways as well as provide early intervention services. Finally, a number of individuals pointed to the role that school attendance and zero tolerance discipline policies have in increasing the dropout rate.

In the remainder of the report we present the Commission's findings and recommendations regarding the topics specified above.

COMMISSION FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following sections outline the key findings and recommendations that address the ten topic areas identified in the legislation that formed the Commission. The Commission's recommendations are divided into four main sections, all of which are critical to dramatically reduce the number and percentage of dropouts in the Commonwealth:

1. New Statewide Expectations;
2. Early Identification;
3. Effective Prevention, Interventions, and Recovery; and
4. Responsive Reforms and Budget Priorities.

It is important to note that the recommendations included in this report do not represent an exhaustive list of the action steps state government and local school districts and communities may need to take to dramatically reduce our state dropout rate (see Appendix C for related resources). Rather, the recommendations in this report primarily focus on the topic areas specified in the legislation. Also, the Commission's recommendations predominantly target steps for state-level action – accordingly, each recommendation includes the entity(ies) that would be chiefly responsible for implementing the steps.

The Commission encourages state agencies, school districts, community partners, parents/guardians, and most of all, students, to continue the conversation and expand on the recommendations included in this report.

New Statewide Expectations

One of the most important lessons to come from the Commonwealth's experience with education reform is the notion that students, educators, families, and communities respond successfully to heightened expectations. This is especially the case when a goal – fundamental systemic reform – is viewed as a shared responsibility. More than 15 years after the Education Reform Act of 1993 was enacted, we are proud that a vast majority of students are meeting or exceeding the expectations established in the standards of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. And because our students continue to out-score all other states on national standardized tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Massachusetts is now considered a role model.

❖ *Statewide Annual Dropout Rate*

Charge: Provide findings and recommendations for setting a goal and timeline for reducing the statewide annual dropout rate

The Commission believes that Massachusetts should take a characteristically aggressive approach to tackling the state's dropout crisis. In the Governor's Education Action Agenda, a high school graduation goal was established: by the year 2020, at least 90 percent of all

Massachusetts students will finish high school ready for college and without the need for remediation.[12] Setting a goal and timeline for reducing the statewide annual dropout rate will support the overarching goals of increasing our state graduation rate and preparing students with the skills to succeed in college, careers, and life.

Dropout data reported by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) over the past 10 years show that the annual grade 9 to 12 dropout rate – meaning the percentage of high school students each year across the state who drop out – has not appreciably changed. For over ten years, the annual dropout rates have fluctuated between 3.1 percent and 3.8 percent, equaling an average of about 10,000 students who drop out each year. According to the most recent dropout data available (2007-08 school year), the statewide rate is 3.4 percent, representing 9,959 dropouts.[13] As noted in the introduction, there are large differences in the dropout rates among student subgroups, which speaks to the persistent achievement and attainment gaps within the Commonwealth.

The issue can be viewed from a different lens: in addition to the release of annual dropout data, the ESE also began releasing the statewide four-year cohort graduation rate starting with the graduation cohort of 2006. Over the last three years, the statewide four-year cohort graduation rate was 79.9 percent, 80.9 percent, and 81.2 percent (cohorts of 2006, 2007, and 2008, respectively). For the cohort of 2008, nearly 10 percent of the students who entered their freshman year in the fall of 2004 dropped out by the end of the 2007-08 school year. Similar to the trends of the dropout data, the graduation rate data also show large differences among student subgroups.[14]

Commission Recommendations for the Statewide Annual Dropout Rate

- **Reduce the statewide high school dropout rate by half – which is equal to 1.7 percent – by the 2013-14 school year.** Each year, beginning with the 2009-10 school year, Massachusetts will reduce the annual dropout rate in order to reach this goal of 1.7 percent at the end of five years. Progress toward this goal positions the Commonwealth to achieve Governor Patrick's vision of 90 percent of students graduating from high school on time and ready for college and career by 2020.

  - Implement each of the recommendations in the remainder of this report, and couple with local community action to support the goal of reducing the dropout rate to 1.7 percent. *(See specific recommendations in the remainder of the report for responsible entities.)*

---

[12] *Ready for 21st Century Success: The New Promise of Public Education. (*2008). Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Office of Governor Deval Patrick.

[13] Data obtained from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. For more information about dropout data for the state, individual districts, and student subgroups as well as the methodology for the dropout calculations, visit the ESE's website at: http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout/.

[14] Ibid.

- Reinforce recommended strategies with a widespread, cross-sector five-year public education campaign focused on the significant and lasting impact that dropping out of high school has on individuals, communities, and the Commonwealth. (***Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet***)

Early Identification

In Massachusetts and across the nation, research shows that there is no one reason that students drop out of school. Research also shows that the decision to do so does not happen suddenly; rather, it is often a process that involves gradual disengagement that begins even before a student reaches high school. However, research conducted in cities across the nation shows that early indicators can help predict which students are most likely to drop out of school.

Identification of students at risk of dropping out enables education leaders at every level to develop an appropriate array of interventions – from additional instructional supports and time to social worker assistance and behavioral health strategies.

❖ *Early Indicator Systems*

Charge: Provide findings and recommendations for further developing early indicator systems to identify students who are at risk of dropping out, or who are not likely to graduate on time from high school without receiving additional support, and school policies that exacerbate dropping out

Early indicator data systems help predict which students are most likely to drop out of school. Effective systems include indicators that are most predictive for their respective communities and schools and use data that are easily accessible. There is no one-size-fits-all combination of risk factors that can be generalized across student populations; however, a steep deterioration in both academic performance and attendance during the transition grades (beginning of 6th and 9th grade) is cited as a powerful dropout predictor.

The ESE developed an Early Warning Indicator Index (EWII), which was piloted in 24 urban school districts during the 2008-09 school year. Currently, the EWII is based on a statistical analysis of the four indicators[15] that best predict a student's likelihood of not graduating on time:

1) Grade eight attendance rate;
2) Grade eight Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) mathematics scaled score;
3) Grade eight MCAS English language arts scaled score; and
4) Incidence of mobility (moving in/out of a district or school one or more times) in grades seven and/or eight.

[15] The data are drawn from the ESE's Student Information Management System (SIMS).

In drawing conclusions about early identification systems per the Legislature's charge, Commission members consulted decades of data and research that point to the need for a broader picture of students that includes social, health, and educational information. By intervening on multiple fronts at an early age, the prospects for an improved outcome increases.

Commission Recommendations for Early Indicator Systems:

- ✶ Expand the ESE EWII. (***Elementary and Secondary Education***)
  - ➢ Replicate the EWII model in all Massachusetts school districts.
  - ➢ Provide guidance and technical assistance to districts on how to incorporate additional risk factors into the existing EWII system, including factors associated with "educational disengagement" (e.g. tardiness, truancy, poor classroom behavior, relationship difficulties, chronic health conditions, substance abuse, pregnancy, and family issues), which may be "high yield" indicators and community/school specific.
  - ➢ Offer guidance and support for school districts on accessing and reviewing the EWII data, as well as using the data to provide appropriate and effective interventions and supports.
  - ➢ Begin identifying students who may be at risk of not graduating on time as early as the third grade and through the transition to ninth grade.
- ✶ Complement the EWII with data sharing systems that are compatible among state agencies. (***Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet***)
  - ➢ Governor Patrick's Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet is working toward a comprehensive, integrated child and youth data warehouse and reporting system. This system should complement the work of the early indicator system described above to provide a more complete picture of the students who are most at risk for not graduating on time.

Effective Prevention, Intervention, and Recovery Strategies

According to the literature, perspectives vary on the root cause of dropping out of high school.[16] Superintendents and other school leaders cite academic challenges, personal and family issues, and the need for employment as dropout drivers; these drivers are often viewed as personal and outside of the school's sphere of influence. Students themselves

[16] Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, Jr., J.J. and Morison, K.M. (2006) *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Civic Enterprises; *Too Big To Be Seen: the Invisible Dropout Crisis in Boston and America.* (2006). Boston Private Industry Council; *Youth Voices—How High Schools can Respond to the Needs of Students and Help Prevent Dropouts.* (2007). Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

report a lack of connection to adults or their school as a leading reason for disengaging from school. Other important reasons students cite include feeling too far behind to catch up, boredom, lack of academic support, and a general feeling of being overwhelmed.

The importance of feeling connected for students' success was emphasized in a recent report published by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). According to *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth*, students stay in school longer, earn higher grades, and score better on classroom tests when they feel connected to school.[17] In addition, school connectedness was found to be the strongest protective factor for both boys and girls to decrease substance abuse, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence, and risk of unintentional injury.

Recent research by the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy uncovers practices that make a difference in lowering dropout rates in Massachusetts schools.[18] The report echoes effective strategies identified in national research, including:

- **Targeting interventions** to individual students, such as increased adult attention and supervision, increased academic support, wrap-around services, and advisories. These interventions are particularly powerful when coupled with early indicator data that show which students are most likely to be at risk for not graduating on time. Some school districts have used an approach that features a "coach" who organizes interventions for these students.

- **Connecting school to college and career** by providing internships, career explorations, or mentoring programs. Giving students the opportunity to connect with college and career experiences can increase student engagement, motivation, and overall academic achievement, resulting in students who are better prepared for their future.

Georgia High School Graduation Coach Initiative

The Georgia High School Graduation Coach Initiative began in 2006 and provides state funding for a coach in each of Georgia's high schools and middle schools. The coach's primary responsibility is to identify at-risk students and help them succeed in school by keeping them on track academically before they consider dropping out. The coaches identify, recruit, and engage parents and concerned adults, organizations, and government agencies to serve in a variety of ancillary roles.

The Georgia state graduation rate has increased from 69.5% in 2006 to 75.4% in 2008. According to staff from the Georgia Governor's Office, the improvement is largely attributed to the Graduation Coach Initiative. Additional information about the initiative can be found at http://gadoe.org/tss_school_improve.aspx?PageReq=TSSGraduationCoach.

[17] *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth. (2009).* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[18] *Meeting the Challenge: Promising Practices for Reducing the Dropout Rate in Massachusetts Schools and Districts*. (2009). Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy.

- **Active recovery** that includes reaching out to dropouts and providing them with alternative pathways to graduation. Prevention, intervention, and responsive reforms will lead to higher graduation rates over time; however, in the meantime, the Commonwealth cannot afford to ignore those young people who have dropped out of high school already. Dropout outreach is a key element that can drive systemic changes for both returning dropouts and students who are at risk of dropping out.

- **Providing alternatives to traditional high schools** that may feature benefits such as smaller class sizes, coaches or case managers who provide increased support, competency-based instruction, accelerated credit recovery, and access to social services. There are a number of alternative models, including:

  - Programming within a larger school;
  - Stand-alone schools; and
  - Programming at community organization or college sites.

Innovations: Alternative pathways in New York City

Since 2002, New York City has made increasing the graduation rate a priority, aggressively closing 86 underperforming schools, opening new small high schools, and creating over fifty alternative programs. These alternatives feature partnerships between schools and community organizations; school staff provide education services, while community organizations provide wraparound support and college/career connections. The core concepts are: differentiated programming for students with targeted academic needs, high expectations, a youth development approach, and preparation for career and college success. Additionally, young people in these programs have the opportunity to participate in internships or work-based learning opportunities.

New York City used data to determine where to target its efforts. First, the district identified patterns in the characteristics of students who dropped out, as well as schools and approaches that were successful in addressing those characteristics. This allowed the district to develop and grow programming best suited to the students in need. These changes are starting to bear fruit: the alternative programs have graduated over 6,500 students in the past four years, and the New York City graduation rate has increased from 46.5% in 2005 to 52.2% in 2007; the magnitude of the increase has been even greater for Black and Latino students.

The development of alternative pathways is one of the most universally acknowledged dropout reduction strategies, and in Massachusetts, demand for these types of programs far outstrips supply. Approximately 4,500 students in grades six through 12 are served by Alternative Education programs in Massachusetts. The Commission estimates that there are another 12,000 students in need.[19]

[19] According to the ESE's Early Warning Indicator Index, during the 2007-2008 school year there were 10,601 students who were categorized as "at risk" for not graduating on time in 8th grade alone.

❖ *Structured Learning Time*

Charge: Provide findings and recommendations for expanding the definition of "structured learning time"

Promising Practice: Gateway to College

Gateway to College is a proven early college model that reconnects struggling students with their education. The program serves students between the ages of 16 and 20 and enables them to complete their diploma requirements while attending their local community college. Credits are transferred to a partnering high school's transcript each semester, and students supplement their coursework with career exploration and support from a small cohort of peers and advisors.

There are currently three Gateway to College programs operating in Massachusetts, and momentum is building to expand the program to serve a greater number of students. To date, 524 students have participated in Massachusetts Gateway to College programs; by adding three additional sites each year over the next three years, Massachusetts could reach an additional 2700 student by 2013. Nationwide, there are 24 colleges in 14 states partnering with 111 school districts to offer this program to students, and the program is yielding promising results:

- 70 percent of students earn a C or better in courses
- The average attendance rate is 88 percent

In addition to replicating and expanding the Gateway to College model in Massachusetts, we must ensure that our policies facilitate and support the program in order to maximize the benefits. Consistent statewide approaches to aspects such as funding, credit transfer, and articulation agreements, to name a few, are necessary to promote access for students who might otherwise discontinue their education.

The state regulations for "structured learning time" allow considerable flexibility in how schools use instructional time with students.[20] Taking full advantage of the provisions within the regulation allows schools to:

- Make different use of their current school day in order to better engage students;
- Accelerate learning and credit accumulation by making meaningful instructional hours outside of the classroom or beyond the traditional school day count toward graduation; and
- Develop and implement internship, work-based learning, and service-learning programs through which students demonstrate the knowledge and skills required by various curriculum frameworks, the Common Core of Learning, and 21st century skills.

At its core, flexibility in utilizing structured learning time is meant to offer schools and educators the opportunity to engage students more deeply in the application of knowledge and to form connections between what students are learning in the classroom and what they can expect to experience in the world of work. For

[20] "Structured learning time" is defined by regulation as: Time during which students are engaged in regularly scheduled instruction, learning activities, or learning assessments within the curriculum for study of the "core subjects" and "other subjects." In addition to classroom time where both teachers and students are present, structured learning time may include directed study, independent study, technology-assisted learning, presentations by persons other than teachers, school-to-work programs, and statewide student performance assessments (603 CMR 27.02).

example, internships and apprenticeships break down the walls of abstraction and powerfully underscore for students why it is important to acquire 21st century skills.

The Commission does not recommend specific changes in the current structured learning time regulations, which cover the minimum number of hours for which elementary and secondary students must be scheduled.

Commission Recommendations for Structured Learning Time

- ✶ Promote the existing flexibility in the structured learning time regulations to encourage schools and educators to develop innovative programs that enable students to accumulate credits while engaging in practical applications of their academic training. (***Elementary and Secondary Education***)

- ✶ Identify – and provide technical assistance to districts on – a variety of approaches that demonstrate how to use time more creatively to increase learning opportunities, to customize instructional approaches, and to engage students in learning. (***Elementary and Secondary Education***)

- ✶ Develop a Structured Learning Time waiver application and waiver process, which would allow districts to reduce the standard learning time hours and provide them with the opportunity to offer differentiated educational programming to students who are most in need of flexible and abbreviated academic schedules. The waiver application process is referenced by the Learning Time regulations; however, there is currently not a waiver application or process in place. (***Elementary and Secondary Education***)

❖ ***Active Recovery***

Charge: Provide findings and recommendations for district activities to identify, locate, interview, and counsel high school drop-outs

Currently there are two mandates directing educators to connect with students who are dropping out: 1) existing Massachusetts law signals the importance of outreach to dropouts (MGL 76 section 18) by requiring that schools invite students who plan to drop out and their parents/guardians to meet to discuss educational options; and 2) for students who leave high school without passing the 10th grade MCAS, the ESE requires that all districts send notices for two years following a student's decision to drop out encouraging them to take advantage of publicly funded post-high school academic support programs.

There is little information on how well schools are implementing these policies, but focus groups and hearing testimony indicate that they are not effectively reaching dropouts. Encouraging districts to reach out more vigorously to students who are dropping out of school could have a substantial impact on the dropout rate, as many dropouts likely would re-engage in school if they were aware of options that accommodate their circumstances.

Commission Recommendations for Active Recovery

✶ Expand district activities to identify, locate, interview, and counsel high school dropouts.

Active Recovery: Boston Public Schools' Project Reconnect

Dropout outreach is a key element that can drive systemic changes for both returning dropouts and students who are at risk of dropping out. Project Reconnect was piloted in Boston by its workforce investment board, the Boston Private Industry Council, in partnership with the Boston Public Schools. Over the last three years, two outreach workers, former dropouts themselves, have re-enrolled over 800 dropouts in school.

A critical early finding of this project was that many students want to return to school, but did not realize they could until someone told them. This high-leverage project has had a significant impact in a short amount of time. It has resulted in changes in thinking, policy, and programming in the Boston Public Schools, as well as a preliminary decrease in the dropout rate. A new re-engagement center just opened to organize the district's efforts to re-enroll dropouts, and one high school has opened an in-house alternative program which adds to the portfolio of alternative options for Boston students. Another benefit of the project is getting a more nuanced understanding why students left school, which is helping to better plan prevention and intervention activities.

- Amend the dropout notification law (MGL Chapter 76, Section 18) to require that during a student's exit interview, the school principal or designee must provide the student and her/his parent/guardian with information on the likely consequences of a life without a high school diploma. (***State Legislature***)

- Provide additional guidance for districts on promising practices for implementing the dropout notification law (MGL Chapter 76, Section 18) and the ESE'S requirement to provide an annual notice for two years after students leave school to help raise awareness about academic support options. (***Elementary and Secondary Education***)

- Develop and distribute a biennial survey to school districts to gather information on their compliance with directives related to identifying, locating, interviewing, and counseling high school dropouts. (***Elementary and Secondary Education***)

- Fund outreach to dropouts, through workforce investment boards and other school-community partnerships, along with other prevention and recovery approaches suggested on page 27 as part of the Dropout Prevention and Recovery Grant program. (***State Legislature*** and ***Executive Office of Education***)

- Provide the support and infrastructure to increase the number of alternative options available to students who need to reconnect to a pathway to graduation. Current law requires students to be counseled about their options, but as noted previously, the Commission found that there are not enough options available to meet their needs. (***State Legislature*** and ***Executive Office of Education***)

- Pilot Readiness Coaches – modeled after the graduation coach concept – in a limited number of schools to craft appropriate interventions based on the specific needs of individual students. The Readiness Coaches would work with teachers, students, and families in a guidance function to tap a range of resources available within a particular community – from tutoring to family support to internships and apprenticeships. (***Executive Office of Education***)

Responsive Reforms and Budget Priorities

The Commission's discussions and public hearing testimony reflected the need for large scale state reforms to support school district and community efforts to dramatically reduce the dropout rate. Many current education policies and practices are vestiges of another time, a time when it was possible for someone to earn a family-supporting wage without a high school diploma; when children played a larger role in the economies of their communities and their families; and when discipline focused more on exclusion than intervention. According to the Commission, reforming these outdated modes of educating and disciplining must become an immediate priority for all stakeholders.

❖ *School Discipline Policies*

Charge: Provide findings and recommendations for exploring the connection between school discipline policies and students' level of engagement in or alienation from school

Testimony at three public hearings suggested that excessive disciplinary action for non-violent offenses such as tardiness and truancy exacerbates the dropout problem. Students already behind in school are often forced to miss additional days through suspensions, which leads to a loss of credits and an inability to catch up. While Commission members expressed support for the right of all school districts to maintain a safe and educationally sound environment, they emphasized that a student's ultimate success and level of engagement with school should not be impacted by discipline policies that are potentially more detrimental to students' futures than effective in altering their behavior. The Commission considered proposals currently being discussed in the Legislature regarding school discipline policies, including efforts to limit and cap the days of exclusion.

Commission Recommendations for School Discipline Policies

✶ Reform outdated discipline policies.

- Immediately amend the law regarding expulsion. Massachusetts General Laws (Chapter 71, Sections 37H and 37H.5) should be updated to remove the provision that no public school district is required to educate a student who is expelled from school. Currently, districts have the option of permanently denying enrollment to any student who is expelled – thereby cutting off young people at the moment they most need intervention. (***State Legislature***)

- Research the connections between school discipline policies and students' levels of engagement or alienation from school. (***Elementary and Secondary Education***)
  - Analyze student-level discipline data collected by the ESE through the School Safety and Discipline Report (SSDR) and the Student Information Management System (SIMS) to draw conclusions about the relationships between various indicators and student engagement.
  - Use new research findings to create updated and expanded advisories to school districts on the topics of school discipline policies and student engagement.
- Update relevant ESE regulations. (***Board of Elementary and Secondary Education***)
  - Require school districts to consider critically the nexus between a student's conduct and the school's welfare before making a determination that a student should be excluded.
  - Require school districts to develop models that incorporate intermediary steps prior to the use of expulsion. Examples of intermediate steps include models that provide for student involvement in resolving problems, such as "youth courts," for less serious infractions.
  - Require a written explanation from the school district to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education when excluding a student for more than 10 consecutive days.

❖ *Compulsory Attendance Age*

Charge: Provide findings and recommendations for raising the compulsory attendance age from 16 years of age to 18 years of age

Compulsory Attendance Age by State

The compulsory age of attendance varies by state. The maximum compulsory age is 16 in 23 states, 17 in eight states, and 18 in 19 states and the District of Columbia. Over the last two years, at least ten states, including Massachusetts, introduced but failed to pass legislation to raise the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18.

Under Massachusetts law, young men and women who have yet to reach the age of majority, 18 years old, are considered minors, and minors are not allowed to make decisions that are injurious to their future welfare. In a 21st century economy, dropping out of high school reduces the potential for lifetime earnings dramatically.

In public hearings, many community members testified that struggling students often look forward to their sixteenth birthday as the moment they can leave school once and for all. This allows younger students to give up on themselves and, in some cases, for educators to give up on students.

In addition, a review of relevant state statutes reveals a lack of clarity as well as archaic provisions that allow even 14- and

15- year-olds to leave school with parental consent (Chapter 76, Section 1). The law specifies that students may be excused from school attendance requirements for medical reasons or the need to contribute to the family income. New technologies enable students to keep up with their lessons remotely, thereby negating the medical provision, and the work option appears to be from an agrarian era. As Massachusetts continues to raise academic expectations for its students, we need to send a complementary message through a change in law. High school graduation is expected of all, and students should not be allowed to abandon this endeavor before they become adults in the eyes of the law.

New Hampshire's Compulsory Age Story

New Hampshire is having initial success with raising the compulsory age as part of a larger strategy to reduce dropout rates. New Hampshire's political leaders and its Department of Education have been working on the state's dropout problem for a number of years, starting with requiring more transparent reporting by districts in 2001. This showed the problem more clearly and pushed districts to make changes.

In 2004-2005, the Legislature began a statewide discussion about raising the age of compulsory attendance, along with other approaches to lowering the rate. In 2007, Chapter 342 was enacted to raise the age of compulsory attendance to 18. The state delayed implementation until July 2009, so that the state and districts could prepare. In anticipation of the law's effective date, political leaders launched a statewide campaign to lower the dropout rate by setting a goal to reduce the dropout rate to zero by 2012.

Features of the campaign have been to target investments in student support and alternative education pathways, to create local district graduation teams and dropout prevention plans, and to conduct a public awareness campaign. New Hampshire has seen its four-year dropout rate decline from 4% to 3.4% between 2002 and 2005, and from 3.4% to 3% between 2005 and 2008.

Commission Recommendations for Compulsory Attendance Age

- Amend state laws and regulations that facilitate departure from school prior to graduation.
  - Eliminate the existing exemptions in Chapter 76 Section 1 that permits 14- and 15-year-old students to leave school for physical or medical reasons, employment, or to engage in non-wage earning work at home. (***State Legislature***)
  - Create a working group charged with identifying existing supplemental supports for students at risk of dropping out and examine the costs and benefits associated with raising the age of compulsory attendance. (***Executive Office of Education***)
  - Raise the compulsory age from 16 to 18 and couple this with adequate supportive programming and services to effectively implement and enforce the changes in school attendance law. (***State Legislature***)
    - Phase in the new requirement by adding one year to the compulsory age in the short run and an additional year over time.
    - A phased-in approach to raising the compulsory attendance age will allow the Commonwealth and its regional collaborations to build capacity and develop

resources and strategies necessary for successful implementation (e.g. hiring additional personnel, training existing staff, expanding or developing additional student supports, developing new graduation pathways).

❖ ***District Response to Excessive Dropout Rates***

Charge: Provide findings and recommendations for establishing a threshold annual dropout rate for each school district such that rates in excess of threshold levels would establish a mandatory requirement for districts to adopt and implement a district-wide action plan to reduce dropout rates and effectively track students

One of the most promising developments in dropout prevention and recovery, both nationally and in Massachusetts, is the emergence of cross-sector collaborations at regional and municipal levels. The Commonwealth needs to ensure that every district needing or desiring inter-agency and community support participates in such a collaborative structure. While such participation should be required of school districts with annual dropout numbers above a certain threshold, these regional or local collaborations should be open to any district that wishes to benefit from a coordinated strategy among school officials, state agencies, and community organizations.

In Massachusetts areas such as Hampden County, Cape Cod and the Islands, and Brockton, staff support is provided by the workforce investment board. These regions set dropout reduction goals and pursue a common agenda, including strategies such as:

- Early indicators and targeted interventions;
- Dropout outreach and re-enrollment;
- Alternative pathways and credit recovery; and
- Innovative practices connecting students to caring adults and meaningful work experiences, as well as college and career opportunities.

Commission Recommendations for District Response to Excessive Dropout Rates

✶ Require districts with an average of 100 or more students dropping out annually (averaged over a three-year period) to participate in a coalition to develop community-district action plans for dropout reduction. (***Elementary and Secondary Education***)

  ➢ Workforce investment boards should take the lead in developing new coalitions through their youth councils or other appropriate regional structures focused on dropout prevention and recovery, and/or support existing efforts as applicable. (***Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development)***

  ➢ Coalitions should be comprised of school districts and community stakeholders, such as state agencies, city agencies, and community-based organizations. The emphasis on community-district teams is meant to acknowledge that struggling students need an array of community supports, in addition to new instructional strategies and supports, in order to succeed.

- Fund the regional coalitions through joint resources and federal stimulus funds. (***Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development***, ***Executive Office of Education***, and/or ***Elementary and Secondary Education***)

❖ ***Reimbursement Mechanisms for Alternative Education Programs***

Charge: Provide findings and recommendations for developing a reimbursement mechanism for districts sending students to Alternative Education programs

High-quality Alternative Education programs and schools provide additional, more intensive academic and socio-emotional supports than typical schools, often requiring additional community supports and financial resources.

Massachusetts does not have a specific state policy for reimbursing districts for costs incurred by enrolling students in Alternative Education programs and schools. While students enrolled in Alternative Education programs and schools are included in the foundation enrollment, which is used to calculate the state aid funding formula (Chapter 70), Alternative Education is not among the categories that invoke a differentiated per pupil cost rate. In other words, the per pupil formula treats students enrolled in Alternative Education programs and schools identically to the majority of other students.

To supplement the Chapter 70 funding, districts cobble together funding for Alternative Education programs using grant and local funds, without a consistent formula. A review of a sample of budgets for these programs and schools suggests that their per-pupil cost often exceeds the average district per-pupil cost, but is lower than many of the specialized out-of-district placements to which some districts send students.

While not a reimbursement mechanism, Chapter 194 of the Acts of 2004, Section 126 created a state line item that supports grants for districts to create or significantly enhance Alternative Education programs for suspended, expelled, and other at-risk students. From its inception through Fiscal Year 2009, the line item was consistently funded at about $1.2 million; it has been reduced to $200,000 in the current (FY2010) budget. Even before this cut, demand and need far outstripped the availability of these grant funds. As noted previously, Alternative Education programs in Massachusetts currently serve only one quarter of the approximately 12,000 at-risk students who could potentially benefit from such programs.

Commission Recommendations for Reimbursement Mechanisms for Alternative Education Programs

✶ Develop reimbursement and funding mechanisms for Alternative Education pathways that ensure quality, equity, and access – and that support new and expanded programming in districts.

- Continue funding and increase the amount available for the Chapter 194 Alternative Education state grant program. (***State Legislature***)

- Aggressively pursue federal and private funding opportunities to support the creation and expansion of Alternative Education pathways throughout the Commonwealth. (***Executive Office of Education*** and ***Elementary and Secondary Education***)

- Form an Alternative Education Advisory Committee (AEAC) that would undertake a thorough study of funding options, including how funds are actually leveraged for programs throughout Massachusetts and how other states fund similar programs. The goal should be to have recommendations ready by the end of FY 2010 to allow for legislative action in FY 2011 and implementation in FY 2012. (***Elementary and Secondary Education***)

- Include the reimbursement and financing of Alternative Education pathways in any education reform initiatives, especially as planning for Readiness Schools and additional charter schools continues to develop. The Commission recommends that some of these schools be dedicated to providing innovative Alternative Education programs and schools for students at risk of dropping out – particularly in communities with high numbers of school dropouts. (***State Legislature*** and ***Executive Office of Education***)

❖ ***Grant Programs***

Charge: Provide findings and recommendations for creating a dropout prevention and recovery grant program

There are a number of states that have specific funding streams for dropout prevention and recovery efforts; some of these states require the use of funds for specific projects, while other states allow a flexible approach to fund use. While there are many current state grant programs that relate (or could relate) to dropout prevention, Massachusetts does not currently fund a grant program for general dropout prevention efforts to support a full range of innovative approaches. There are a number of strategies already occurring in Massachusetts that could serve as replication models to bring programs and services to scale with grant funding.

Commission Recommendations for Grant Programs

✶ Create a new Dropout Prevention and Recovery Grant program that would embrace and support innovation and systemic reforms at the local level. (***State Legislature***, ***Executive Office of Education***, and ***Elementary and Secondary Education***)

- This new grant program would emphasize innovation, whole school redesign and may fund strategies and programs including, but not limited to:

  - Support for early indicator systems;
  - Support for collaboration with outside community organizations for outreach to dropouts and dropout re-enrollment support;
  - Staffing for dropout prevention, intervention, and recovery efforts;
  - Staffing for outreach to dropouts;
  - Alternative Education programs and other high school pathways;
  - Engaging instruction and curriculum methodologies (service-learning, project-based and work-based learning);
  - Early college models;
  - Mentoring programs;
  - Physical and mental health services;
  - Credit recovery options;
  - Graduation coaches;
  - Wrap-around services;
  - Career exploration;
  - Life and social skills training; and
  - Planning activities to address school, district, and community systemic change.

❖ ***Financial Incentives***

Charge: Provide findings and recommendations for providing financial incentives for districts that are effective in graduating at-risk students and recovering high school dropouts

Some states are experimenting with providing financial incentives to schools that meet or exceed state accountability measures, including graduating from high school. Louisiana recently created an accountability formula (Title 28, Bulletin 111) that includes schools' graduation rates in addition to their performance on assessments, and is linked to recognition and monetary awards for demonstrated achievement and growth.

Indiana is planning to award $20,000 in staff bonuses to 10 schools with the most improved graduation rates in the 2009-10 school year; two high schools with enrollments of fewer than 300 will receive $10,000. The incentives are intended to increase Indiana's current 78 percent graduation rate. Schools will have discretion over the distribution of funds to staff members.

While not specifically related to graduating at-risk students, the Arkansas state senate passed legislation (SB 918) to create the Arkansas Smart Core Incentive Funding Program. Smart Core is similar to our state's MassCore[21] and prescribes that students take and

[21] The Massachusetts High School Program of Studies (MassCore) is intended to help Massachusetts high school graduates arrive at college or the workplace well prepared and reduce the number of students taking remedial courses in college. MassCore recommends a comprehensive set of subject area courses and units as well as other learning opportunities to complete before graduating from high school.

complete a specific number and distribution of courses. This past April, Arkansas Governor Mike Beebe signed into law legislation (Act 1481) creating the Arkansas Smart Core Incentive Funding Program. This program will provide financial rewards to Arkansas schools relative to the percentage of students who graduate with a college- and career-ready Smart Core diploma each year. To be eligible, at least 90 percent of students at the school must have completed the Smart Core curriculum, and schools must maintain an overall graduation rate above the state average for the previous three years.

It is too early to gauge the success of the three state initiatives described above, and it is important to note that there is no current research that points to a direct correlation between financial incentives and decreasing the number of dropouts. The Commission declined to recommend the use of such incentives until data show their usefulness as a tool. Commission members urge the ESE to use other forms of recognition, such as the Commonwealth Compass School model that celebrates MCAS improvement.

CONCLUSION

Massachusetts leads the nation and world on many standardized tests, yet approximately 10,000 students leave school every year without a diploma. While the decision to drop out is an individual one, it is often reflective of the levels of family, school, and community support an individual student receives. Furthermore, the decision to drop out creates grave consequences for the Commonwealth, and we have a collective responsibility to meet the challenge head on.

The moral imperative to provide all children with a high-quality education that prepares them for productive and fulfilling futures is evident. The social and economic implications of the dropout crises are stark as well. High school dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to use Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Food Stamps, and subsidized housing. They create an incredible burden for the Commonwealth's Medicaid system and account for a significant proportion of police and correction services. At the same time, high school dropouts generate significantly less tax revenue than high school graduates and are not equipped to meet the labor force requirements of Massachusetts' increasingly sophisticated economy. Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies estimated that each dropout costs Massachusetts almost a half million dollars over his or her lifetime.

In these dire economic times, we cannot afford to be complacent. All students must graduate from a Commonwealth high school with a diploma in hand, well prepared to embark on postsecondary education or a viable career. In this report, the Commission has laid out a strategy of state-level steps to reach this goal. In five years, we will reduce the Commonwealth's dropout rate to half of the current rate through evidence-based strategies in the areas of early identification; effective prevention, intervention, and recovery strategies; and responsive reforms and budget priorities. Together, we will solve the dropout crisis by ensuring that every child has the supports and opportunities he or she needs to succeed in school and beyond.

APPENDIX A: ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION AND OTHER EDUCATION PATHWAYS

The legislation that created the Graduation and Dropout Prevention and Recovery Commission stated that the Commission should include a comprehensive listing of Alternative Education options and other pathways to earn a diploma offered within the public school system. The legislation also requested that the Commission include alternative options to enable students who have dropped out to return and receive a high school diploma.

The following descriptions on Massachusetts high school education pathways supplements the information included in the Commission's findings and recommendations throughout the report.

- **Alternative Education** programs and schools are an initiative within a public school district, charter school, or educational collaborative established to serve at-risk students whose needs are not being met in the traditional school setting.
    - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education information on Alternative Education, including promising practice, grants, and related resources: http://www.doe.mass.edu/alted/
    - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education directory of Alternative Education programs and schools throughout the state: http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/search/search_link.aspx?orgType=26,25&runOrgSearch=Y&leftNavId=11238
- **Career/Vocational Technical Education** programs are offered by many high schools across Massachusetts.
    - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education information on career/vocational technical education including the state and federal laws governing these programs, professional development opportunities, and related resources: http://www.doe.mass.edu/cte/
    - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education directory of Chapter 74 Vocational Technical Education programs throughout the state: http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/search/search_link.aspx?orgType=VOC&runOrgSearch=Y&leftNavId=11238

- **Charter schools** are independent public schools that operate under five year charters granted by the Commonwealth's Board of Education.

  - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education information on charter schools including laws and regulations, best practice, and the process for opening a charter school:
    http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/

  - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education directory of charter schools throughout the state:
    http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/search/search_link.aspx?orgType=13&runOrgSearch=Y&leftNavId=11238

- **Educational Collaboratives** provide inter-district programs and services to member districts across the state.

  - Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (MOEC) is the professional organization representing the Commonwealth's educational collaboratives:
    http://moecnet.org/

  - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education directory of educational collaboratives throughout the state:
    http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/search/search_link.aspx?orgType=3&runOrgSearch=Y&leftNavId=11238

- **Early College** programs and schools blend high school and college, streamlining the time it takes to complete high school diploma and the first two years of college.

  - The Early College High School Initiative provides resources and technical assistance for early college programs throughout the country:
    http://www.earlycolleges.org/

  - Gateway to College National Network provides technical assistance and grants to create the Gateway to College model of early college programs. The Gateway model is specifically aimed at recovering students that have dropped out and students that are on the verge of dropping out.
    http://www.gatewaytocollege.org/

- **Dual Enrollment** provides students with the opportunity to take college-level courses for both high school and college credit.

  - Department of Higher Education information on dual enrollment, including details on state funding:
    http://www.mass.edu/currentinit/currentinitdualenrollment.asp

- Department of Higher Education directory of dual enrollment contacts at Massachusetts public institutions on higher education: http://www.mass.edu/currentinit/currentinitdualenrollmentcontacts.asp

- **Private Special Education Schools** provide day and residential special education services for public school students in need of specialized services.

  - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education information on the approval process for private special education schools: http://www.doe.mass.edu/pqa/review/psr/

  - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education directory of approved private special education schools: http://www.doe.mass.edu/pqa/spedpvtlist/directory.asp

- **School Choice** program allows parents to send their children to schools in communities other than the city or town in which they reside. Tuition is paid by the sending district to the receiving district.

  - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education overview information on the Massachusetts school choice program: http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/schoice/

  - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education directory of districts' school choice status: http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/schfin/choice/choice_list.aspx

- **Readiness Schools** provide educators and community partners opportunities to develop innovative models for public schools using increased flexibility and autonomy with regard to curriculum, school schedule and calendar, staffing, and district policies.

  - The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education awarded initial planning grants for the development of Readiness Schools: http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/grants/grants10/rfp/221G.html

  - The Patrick Administration filed legislation to establish Readiness Schools as a major component of its education reform package: http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=eoesubtopic&L=3&L0=Home&L1=Legislation+%26+Policy&L2=Governor+Patrick%27s+Education+Reform+Package%3a+Turning+Around+Low-Performing+Schools+and+Promoting+Innovation+for+All&sid=Eeoe

APPENDIX B: COMMISSION MEMBERS

Commission Chair: Paul Reville, *Secretary of Education*
Vice Chair: Suzanne Bump, *Secretary of Labor and Workforce Development*

John Auerbach
Commissioner of Public Health

Renee Aird
Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Emmanuel Allen
Boston Private Industry Council

Mitchell Chester
Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

Jenny Curtin
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Patrick Driscoll
Massachusetts House of Representatives

Kevin Duffey
Massachusetts Associations of School Committees

Anthony Galluccio
Massachusetts Senate

Sara Garofalo
Massachusetts Department of Children and Families

Gail Garinger
Office of the Child Advocate

Lisa Gentile
Office of Sen. Pangiotakos

Jeff Grantino
Bridgewater-Raynham Regional School District

Pati Gregson
Mount Wachusett Community College

Kathy Hamilton
Boston Private Industry Council

Elizabeth Hart
Office of Sen. Tisei

Jennifer James
Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development

Julia Kehoe
Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance

Aundrea Kelley
Massachusetts Department of Higher Education

Christine Kenney
Massachusetts Department of Youth Services

Cristina Killingsworth
Office of Sen. Pangiotakos

Susan Lange
Commonwealth Corporation

Barbara Leadholm
Commissioner of Mental Health

Angelo McClain
Commissioner of Children and Families

Robert McGrail
Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development

Celina Miranda
Bank of New York Mellon

Alexandra Morgan
Office of Rep. St. Fleur

George Moriarty
Massachusetts Department of Workforce Development

Charles Murphy
Massachusetts House of Representatives

Steven Pangiotakos
Massachusetts Senate

Karen L. Payne
NAACP

Coren Peacock
Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket School to Career Partnership

Stafford Peat
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Tony Pierantozzi
Somerville Public Schools

Chris Smith
Boston and Beyond

Marlies Spanjaard
Committee for Public Counsel

Marie St. Fleur
Massachusetts House of Representatives

Neil Sullivan
Boston Private Industry Council

Andrew Sum
Center for Labor Market Studies

Michael Taylor
Massachusetts Director of Workforce Development

Jane Tewksbury
Commissioner of Youth Services

Phil Veysey
American Federation of Teachers, Massachusetts

Carol Woodbury
Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District

Keith Westrich
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

APPENDIX C: RELATED RESOURCES

Massachusetts Dropout Reduction Website

- The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Dropout Reduction website includes: 1) an overview on the topic of high school dropouts; 2) information on relevant legislation and regulations; 3) summaries of state dropout reduction activities; and 4) resources including state and national reports, as well as the websites for national organizations connected to dropout reduction: http://www.doe.mass.edu/dropout/

Massachusetts Data on High School Dropouts and Graduates

- Department of Elementary and Secondary Education dropout data for the state, individual districts, and student subgroups as well as the methodology for the dropout calculations: http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout/

- Department of Elementary and Secondary Education graduation data for the state, individual districts, and student subgroups as well as the methodology for the graduation calculations: http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/gradrates/

Massachusetts Recent Reports on High School Dropouts

- *Meeting the Challenge: Promising Practices for Reducing the Dropout Rate in Massachusetts Schools and Districts*. (2009). Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy. http://www.renniecenter.org/research_docs/0902-DropoutBrief-final.pdf

- *Dropout Prevention in the South Coast: Choosing a New Path to Economic Prosperity.* (2009). The Urban Initiative at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. http://www.umassd.edu/urbaninitiative/assets/southcoastdropout.pdf

- *Youth Voices—How High Schools can Respond to the Needs of Students and Help Prevent Dropouts.* (2007). Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. http://www.doe.mass.edu/hsreform/youthfocusgroup.doc

- McLaughlin, J., Sum, A., Khatiwada, I., and Palma, S. (2007). *State and Local Fiscal Consequences of High School Dropout Problems in Massachusetts*. Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University. http://www.clms.neu.edu/publication/documents/State_Local_Fiscal_HighSchool_Dropouts_Mass.pdf

- *Too Big To Be Seen: the Invisible Dropout Crisis in Boston and America.* (2006). Boston Private Industry Council. http://www.bostonpic.org/files/resources/too_big_to_be_seen.pdf

- *Dropouts in Massachusetts Public Schools: District Survey Results*. (2006). Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. http://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/dropout/06survey.doc

Selected National Reports on Dropout Reduction

- *School Connectedness: Strategies for Increasing Protective Factors Among Youth.* (2009). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. http://www.cdc.gov/healthyYouth/AdolescentHealth/connectedness.pdf

- *Dropout Prevention.* (2008). Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/dp_pg_090308.pdf

- Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, Jr., J.J., and Wulsin, S.C. (2008). *Engaged for Success: Service-Learning as a Tool for High School Dropout Prevention.* Civic Enterprises. http://www.civicenterprises.net/pdfs/service-learning.pdf

- *From No Child Left Behind to Every Child a Graduate.* (2008). Alliance for Excellent Education. http://www.all4ed.org/files/ECAG.pdf

- Bridgeland, J.M., Dilulio, Jr., J.J., and Morison, K.M. (2006). *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts*. Civic Enterprises. http://www.civicenterprises.net/pdfs/thesilentepidemic3-06.pdf