

*A Follow-up Report to **Don't Call Them Dropouts***

DON'T QUIT ON ME

**What Young People Who Left School
Say About the Power of Relationships**

**Center for
Promise**
AMERICA'S PROMISE ALLIANCE®

AT-A-GLANCE

Don't Quit on Me examines the role supportive relationships play in promoting on-time high school graduation and helping young people who don't graduate on time re-engage with education.

THE STUDY'S FOUR MAJOR FINDINGS ARE:

1. Too many young people are facing too many hurdles to high school graduation with too little help.
2. Relationships matter, but their importance to graduation varies by type, source and intensity of support.
3. Social supports from multiple sources buffer the effects of adverse life experiences for most young people. However, those who are facing the greatest adversity need more intensive support than family, school and friends can provide.
4. Young people are more likely to graduate if they have access to a web of supportive relationships, which may include parents, adults inside and outside of school, and peers. At least one stable, anchoring relationship can act as a gateway to this wider web of support.

The relationship itself is a powerful vehicle for change. The more sources of support young people have, the better their chances to graduate from high school.

The full study can be found at [GradNation.org/DontQuit](https://gradnation.org/dontquit).

“ Don't Call Them Dropouts *helped us understand the life circumstances of young people who leave high school without graduating. Don't Quit on Me helps us understand how we can help them. That's welcome news for all of us who hope one day to make the promise of America real for every child.*”

Mrs. Alma Powell, Chair, America's Promise Alliance

WHO'S A QUITTER?

You can't solve a problem if you don't understand what the problem is.

As the organization leading the GradNation campaign to increase high school graduation rates, it's incumbent on us to deeply understand why young people are leaving school before graduating. That's why last year we asked young people just that question and why we listened so carefully to their responses.

Young people who left high school before graduating told us their lives are enormously complicated and challenging, often marked by abuse, homelessness, neglect, hunger, violence and illness.

We also heard that young people felt the term "dropout" wasn't a fair or accurate term. Yes, they left school before graduating, but given everything that was happening in their lives, their decisions seemed reasonable, even responsible, to them. And even though they left school early, they still had aspirations and plenty of determination. They didn't want to be labeled quitters or losers, which is what the term "dropout" conveys.

With that admonition in mind, we called our report *Don't Call Them Dropouts*.

Young people also told us last year about relationship poverty. They said they had looked for the people, relationships and support they needed and just couldn't find them.

So this year, with enthusiastic support from our partners at Target, we set out to learn more about what young people need from relationships with adults. We asked what that support looks like. What could adults and peers do to help them stay in school, help bring them back after leaving, help them begin to thrive?

They told us they need respect, not judgment. They need resources—bus passes, a ride to school, a meal, a job, a chance. They need people to show care through actions, not advice. They need an anchor, not a hero. And they need a web of support, a healthy, supportive community of their own.

If this year's report tells us anything, it's that young people want and need us to stick with them, and that every action, or lack of action, matters.

Relationships are powerful vehicles for growth, particularly for young people living in challenging circumstances. And yet, too many young people don't have enough relationships with stable, caring adults who can help them get what they need to stay on track toward graduation and career. Relationship poverty is not a lack of love or family, but a lack of access to additional sources of support that can lead to a more promising future.

It's on us to do something about it.

Sincerely,



John Gomperts
President & CEO
America's Promise Alliance

CHANGE THE ODDS

Today, too many young people face incredible odds of staying in school, let alone graduating. And yet education is a pathway out of poverty and into economic opportunity and a life of wellness. It's also critical to creating educated leaders and a skilled workforce for the future. As caring adults, we need to do more than help youth beat the odds. We need to change the odds.

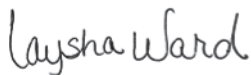
That's why Target is proud to support this deeper look into how we can help young people re-engage and keep them on the path to high school graduation so they're ready for college or some form of postsecondary education, a career and a healthy life.

At Target, we believe that every child deserves a quality education regardless of race or socioeconomic status. To show our support, we've committed \$1 billion to the cause—an investment we'll reach by the end of this year. Our team members donated more than a million volunteer hours nationwide in 2014. We use our strengths as a national retailer to foster public/private partnerships, convene cross-sector leaders, and raise awareness of the importance of education. And we support strong, action-oriented partners like America's Promise Alliance that are dedicated to helping all children reach their full potential.

But there's also something we all can do. Whether you're a parent, educator, nonprofit leader or a concerned citizen, we must step up to help turn adversity into opportunity. Babysit for a struggling young neighbor. Introduce a young person to a prospective employer. Become a graduation coach like I did for a student in need in my community or find other ways to support youth like caring adults did for me when I was young.

An interrupted education doesn't have to be the end of the learning journey. We need to show young people that we care about their overall wellbeing. We can help them navigate the chaos in their lives and connect them to supportive relationships, experiences and resources. We want them to know that education is important and they are important.

Respectfully,



Laysha Ward
Chief Corporate Social Responsibility Officer
Executive Vice President, Target

INTRODUCTION

This report examines, from the perspective of young people themselves, the roles that relationships with adults and peers play in decisions about staying in, leaving and returning to high school.

Building on previous studies, including *Don't Call Them Dropouts*¹ (see sidebar on page 4), this report offers new insights about how support from adults and peers can help to close the remaining gaps between those who graduate from high school on time and those who don't.

The nation's high school graduation rate reached a record high—81.4 percent—in 2013 and remains on pace to reach a national on-time graduation rate of 90 percent by the year 2020. This progress means that, over the last decade, 1.8 million more students graduated rather than leaving school before graduating.

Still, there is much more work to do to help all young people build a foundation for success. The latest *Building a Grad Nation* report² clearly shows that the students who do not earn a diploma with their ninth-grade classmates are disproportionately low-income, students of color, English-language learners and students with disabilities.³

Why does this matter? Because, in a nation built on the dream of equal opportunity, not all students have an equal chance to succeed. Because more than 485,000 young people still leave high school each year before earning a diploma, severely limiting their options for further education and sustainable employment. Because those who don't return to school will remain less likely to be employed, will earn lower taxable income, will be more likely to require social services, are more likely to be involved with the justice system, and will live shorter, less healthy lives.⁴ Because young people who don't graduate from high school aren't qualified to serve in our armed forces and are far less likely to vote. Because the financial cost to society for just one cohort of young people who leave school without graduating can be calculated in

billions of dollars.⁵ In sum, graduation matters now more than ever—not just for young people's futures, but for our country's future.

What, then, can we do to increase the graduation rate?

We know from previous research on youth development,⁶ dropout prevention⁷ and social support networks⁸ that relationships—for example, with formal and informal mentors⁹—are key to helping young people stay in school, even against long odds. But we know less about how and why these relationships matter and what it takes to make the right support available at the right time for young people who are not graduating high school on time.

Relationships are key to helping young people stay in school, even against long odds.

This report seeks to illuminate:

- How different **sources** of support—parents, adults at school, adults in the community and peers—relate to young people's decisions about staying in or leaving school.
- How different **types** of support matter to young people, particularly with respect to promoting their strengths or buffering the risks they face.
- What it takes for young people and the adults in their lives to develop supportive relationships that lead to continuous engagement or re-engagement in school. That is, what are the **conditions** under which support is successfully offered and received?

1 Center for Promise, 2014

2 Civic Enterprises, 2015

3 See <http://www.americaspromise.org/high-school-graduation-facts-ending-dropout-crisis>

4 Caterall, 2011; Civic Enterprises, 2015; Rouse, 2007; Sum et al, 2009

5 Amos, 2008; Belfield, Levin & Rosen, 2012; Sum, Khatiwada, McLaughlin & Palma, 2009

6 Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006; Damon, 2004; Lerner, 2004

7 Hammond, Smink & Drew, 2007; Rumberger & Lim, 2008

8 Donlan, Gunning & Wentzel, 2015

9 Civic Enterprises, 2014; George, Cusick, Wasserman & Gladden, 2007; Nathan, 2013; Rodriguez-Planas, 2012; Schirm, Stuart, & McKie, 2006

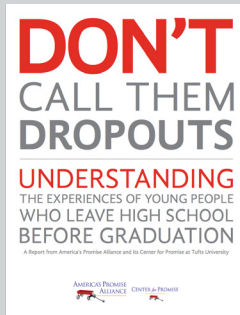
DON'T CALL THEM DROPOUTS

In May 2014, the Center for Promise at America's Promise Alliance released *Don't Call Them Dropouts*, a report based on narratives gathered from more than 200 young people in 16 communities and a 3,000-person national survey.

The research team for *Don't Call Them Dropouts* heard four clear messages about why young people say they leave high school before graduating, and what enables them to return. In short:

- There is no one compelling reason or circumstance that explains why young people leave school, or that enables them to return. Rather, both decisions result from an accumulation of factors.
- Young people who interrupt their high school education are likely to be navigating toxic environments at home, at school, or in their neighborhoods. Study participants described multiple adverse experiences during their high school years.
- Young people persistently pursued human connection. These relationships could lead young people toward or away from school, depending on the circumstances.
- Before and after leaving high school, young people showed tremendous resilience in the face of adversity. However, individual strength, by itself, wasn't enough to bring young people back to school. They needed intensive support from caring adults or trusting peers to re-engage with education.

This report builds, in part, on the [2014 findings](#).



Our hypothesis is that supportive relationships are a critical strategic intervention in the lives of young people who are most at risk for not graduating on time. By understanding how social relationships influence academic outcomes—such as high school graduation or interrupted enrollment¹⁰—as well as the conditions in which these relationships flourish, decision-makers at all levels can intervene more strategically in young people's lives, affect the social contexts within which young people interact with adults and peers, and positively affect young people's path to high school graduation.



¹⁰ We do not use the familiar term “dropout” to describe young people who interrupt their education, because what the Center for Promise team has heard over the last two years of research tells us that this is not how young people see themselves, nor is it an accurate description of the events that result in their leaving school. Instead, we use the terms “interrupted enrollment” and “continuous enrollment” to describe students’ educational trajectories.

METHODOLOGY

The research team for *Don't Quit on Me* conducted 16 group interviews in eight cities with a total of 102 young people, 19 additional individual in-depth interviews in six of the same eight cities, and a national 96-question survey of 2,830 young people, 42 percent (1,190) of whom had interrupted their high school education for at least one semester before graduating.

When reading the findings, it is important to note that the **interview participants** (in both group and individual interview settings) and the **survey respondents** were drawn from different populations. The more than 120 young people who participated in the group and individual interviews live in urban communities and were connected in some way to organizations that re-engage young people who have left high school. (See a list of these organizations in Appendix II of the full report.) The 2,830 survey respondents were from an online panel and came from 48 states and the District of Columbia.

To analyze and interpret the interview and survey data, the study utilized what is called a “convergence mixed-methods triangulation design.” Mixed-methods designs recognize that not all research questions can be answered using a single formulation of data.

For a full description of the methodology, including the quantitative and qualitative samples, see Appendix I of the full report.

FINDINGS

Don't Quit on Me examines the role supportive relationships play in promoting on-time high school graduation and helping young people who don't graduate on time re-engage with education.

In short, we find new evidence that too many young people are facing too many hurdles to graduation with too little help. We find that the more sources of support young people have, the better their chances to graduate high school. This is especially true for the young people who have experienced the most adversity in their teen years.

We find that caring and action — also known as emotional and instrumental support — work in tandem to boost likely graduation.

Building on previous research about relationships, we find that social supports allow strengths like self-control to be expressed, buffer adversity, and reduce the likelihood that a young person will leave school.

We find that young people experiencing adversity need a caring adult who provides a deep level of trust, stability and responsiveness — “whatever it takes” — to begin to rebuild the stability that is missing in many young people's lives.

We find that one anchoring relationship is often necessary but not sufficient to help young people thrive. They also need a web of supportive relationships. An Anchor can help illuminate an existing Web or help construct a new one to provide support.

The relationship itself is a powerful vehicle for change. The more sources of support young people have, the better their chances to graduate from high school.

Through interviewing 120+ young people and surveying nearly 3,000 more, here's what we heard.

FINDING 1

Too many young people are facing too many hurdles to high school graduation with too little help.

Young people who leave school before graduating are much more likely to have experienced multiple “adverse life experiences” (ALE) when they were 14 to 18 years old—for example, being suspended or expelled, caring for a relative, living in foster care or becoming homeless.

- On average, young people who interrupt enrollment in high school report that they experienced **twice as many** adverse life experiences during adolescence as young people who stayed continuously enrolled.
- More than half of interrupted-enrollment young people experienced **five or more** of these adverse events, compared to approximately 20 percent of those who graduated without interruption.
- Exposure to multiple risk factors is related to a higher risk of interrupted enrollment—with the odds increasing by **19 percent** for each additional adverse experience.

“ Growing up, my mom, when she was single, my dad was never around. And then I had a younger sister I had to take care of. My mom, we barely had the minimum. She provided food and everything that we needed. She was always busy, so we never really saw her, so I was always in charge of my little sister. Going to school, I did good...then once I hit high school, I had to step up and get a job and help out. So I started going away from school, and I got a job, and helped my mom out and take care of my little sister, so little by little I fell out of school. At the time money was more important, ‘cause we had to get by day by day. So that’s when I lost track and just dropped out.”

Freddy (age 24)

Some adverse events are greater potential threats to graduation than others.

- There are seven adverse experiences that rise to the top as statistically significant predictors of interrupting enrollment: becoming a parent, being suspended or expelled, being part of a peer group in which most friends left school before graduating, not feeling academically prepared for school, experiencing a major mental health issue (like depression or anxiety), being homeless, and moving homes (mobility).
- Being suspended or expelled more than **doubles the odds** that a young person will interrupt his or her high school education. The same is true for a young person who becomes a mother or father or who has many friends who stop attending school.
- Young people who interrupted their enrollment are **three times more likely** than continuously-enrolled students to have changed schools multiple times during their high school years. Frequent mobility can have a strong negative effect on graduation rates.

Young people who interrupted their enrollment are **THREE TIMES MORE LIKELY** than continuously-enrolled students to have changed schools multiple times during their high school years.



Adverse life experiences predicting interrupted enrollment

Adverse Life Experience	Continuous Enrollment (CE)	Interrupted Enrollment (IE)	Odds Ratio (Increased Likelihood of Interrupted Enrollment)
EVER SUSPENDED/EXPELLED	9.1%	29.9%	2.3**
GAVE BIRTH OR FATHERED A CHILD	5.4%	18.1%	2.2**
MOST FRIENDS DROPPED OUT	6.5%	21.6%	2.2**
MAJOR MENTAL HEALTH ISSUE	30.4%	52.5%	1.9**
NOT PREPARED FOR SCHOOL	14.8%	36.1%	1.8**
EVER HOMELESS	5.2%	18.7%	1.5*
MOVED HOMES	28.6%	47.8%	1.3*

Control variables: Gender, Age, Race, Maternal Education* *p < .05; **p < .01

See Appendix III, Section 2, Tables 14-29 in the full report for a complete list of the Adverse Life History Experiences by Enrollment Status.

SEVEN THREATS TO GRADUATION

Students experiencing any of these adverse situations are less likely (statistically speaking) to stay continuously enrolled in school, and more likely to need additional social support.

- Suspension or expulsion
- Giving birth or fathering a child
- Being part of a peer group in which most friends did not graduate
- Experiencing a major mental health issue, (e.g., depression or anxiety)
- Not feeling academically prepared for school
- Homelessness
- Moving homes (mobility)

Leaders in community and school settings can make extra efforts to prevent these threats to graduation (e.g., expulsion, homelessness) or to provide tangible resources to help young people handle them.

“The staff called me into the office and said they gotta hold me back for two years because my old school that I went to back from ninth and tenth grade, they said they lost my credits and I wasn’t in their system no more. So I told them I wasn’t staying. I rather just drop out and do what I do.”

Marcus (group interview participant)

Youth who interrupted their high school education reported having fewer people to turn to for help during their high school years. When they had trouble in school, young people in this group were **twice as likely** to report that they reached out to “no one” for help and **half as likely** to have reached out to a teacher.

“So she [mom] moved back to doing crack and drinking. So it was just I don’t know how to explain, but at that time my mind was racing on way other things than school. Then with the school I went to there was a lot of kids like me so every teacher can’t focus on every single kid...So that’s how the school was. Everybody had, teenagers had issues and all the teenagers I seen was searching for help, but it was so many teenagers that every adult couldn’t reach out to in the school particularly.”

Justin (age 25)

FINDING 2

Relationships matter, but their importance to graduation varies by type, source and intensity of support.

Young people place a high value on stability, and our qualitative analysis suggests that the **presence of stable, trusting relationships** is a key factor enabling re-engagement. Stable relationships with non-family adults, in particular, play a big role in young people's engagement with school.

While adverse events predict a higher likelihood of leaving school before graduating, stable relationships that provide specific kinds of support — particularly emotional and instrumental — can lower the likelihood that young people experiencing adversity will leave school. (See sidebar below for definitions of four types of social support.)

“...All my bills I have to pay, we always manage my money to see which one goes where, how much I have for my daughter this month, phone bill, stuff like that. They've [youth workers at a re-engagement program] been really helping me manage everything and make sure I'm on the right track, making sure everything is paid and just basically staying on top of me and as they do, I'm starting to get the hang of it myself.”

Terrence (age 24)

DEFINING SOCIAL SUPPORT

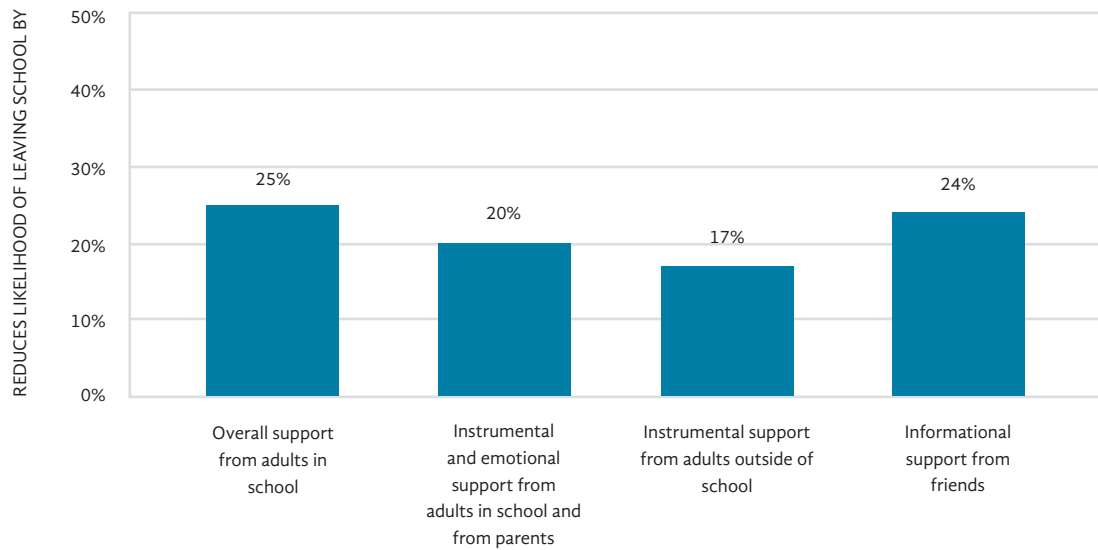
Support can come from many sources, including parents, peers, adults at school and adults in the community.

Don't Quit on Me examines four types of social support: emotional, informational, appraisal and instrumental. Each of these plays a specific role for a young person's development.

- **Emotional support** expresses comfort, caring and trust.
- **Informational support** is comprised of helpful insights or advice such as how to re-engage in school, where to find a job or how to apply to college.
- **Appraisal support** refers to positive feedback that someone can use for self-evaluation, such as affirming a young person's competence or pointing out specific strengths that can lead to success.
- **Instrumental support** refers to tangible resources or services, including providing a bus pass, babysitting an infant so a parent can attend school, introducing a young person to a potential employer or bringing a young person to visit a college campus.



Relationships and continuous enrollment



What's more, supportive relationships can help young people direct their strengths toward academic success.

As part of our quantitative analysis, we examined how self-control (an internal strength) interacted with overall **support from parents, adults inside school, adults outside school and peers** to predict the likelihood of interrupted enrollment. We also looked at the interaction between self-control and the types of support each source provided. We found that:

- Supportive relationships can both partially buffer the effects of adverse events and promote students' own strengths, helping them over hurdles.
- Promotive and buffering effects vary based on the source of support and the type of support being conveyed.
- The combination of high support and high self-control work together, beyond the effect of either factor alone, to boost the likelihood of graduating without interruption.

“ They're like the family I didn't have. I consider that a second home because they're caring and they're willing to reach out to us. They're not scared to tell me, 'Oh you're falling off, you're acting this kind of way, you're not doing the best that you can.' When it ...came to assignments that were required for graduation, one particular teacher helped me out, her name was Ms. W_ that was my literature teacher, she sat down with me a few times explaining the ethnography we had to do.”

Tyrell (age 20)

FINDING 3

Social supports from multiple sources buffer the effects of adverse life experiences for most young people. However, those who are facing the greatest adversity need more intensive support than family, school and friends can provide.

To examine multiple sources of support, survey respondents were asked a series of questions about how often four different groups of people in their lives — parents, adults inside school, adults outside school, and peers — provided various kinds of support when the young people were between 14 and 18 (e.g., cared about me, treated me fairly, showed me how to do things, helped me solve problems, made sure I had what I needed for school).

We conducted a statistical analysis to understand whether certain constellations of sources and types of support affect a young person's likelihood of graduating without interruption, even when faced with substantial adversity.¹¹

We found that:

- Social supports from multiple sources buffer the effects of adverse life experiences for most young people.
- For young people reporting medium levels of risk (two to four adverse experiences), **a web of support from parents, adults in school, and friends can buffer adversity**, with a positive effect on likely continuous enrollment.

- More sources of support are better. For example, for young people experiencing medium levels of risk, high support from both **parents and adults outside school** makes uninterrupted enrollment 11 percentage points more likely than high support from parents alone. Adding a third source of support — friends — boosts likely continuous enrollment by another 5 percent.

Social supports from multiple sources buffer the effects of adverse life experiences for most young people.

- For young people reporting **five or more** adverse life experiences, the likelihood of continuous enrollment stays well below 50 percent, even with high support from multiple sources.
- However, based on speaking directly with more than 100 young people in group and individual interview settings, we can see that previously disengaged youth who receive more intentional and intensive supports are able to re-engage with their education.

¹¹ Using latent class analysis, a statistical method for creating groups out of multiple measures, we determined that there are six “classes” or categories of youth that emerge from these assessments: Class 1. Multiple supports/high overall support; Class 2. Multiple supports/parents and adults outside school; Class 3. Multiple supports/adults in school, adults outside school, friends; Class 4. Single support/parents; Class 5. Single support/friends; and Class 6. Low overall support. Please see the full report for more detail about the findings and the related methodology.





“...They'll do anything to make sure you get yourself to pass. For [program name], they review our grades every week, and then if we're failing the class, they'll put us into tutoring, or homework — what is it called? Math ed, too, if we're failing math. And then the lab, you can stay after school for an hour and they will help. You could ask any teacher for help in any subject. The social workers help, too.

[Youth Worker] was talking to me today about how she has a bachelors in English and biology. She was just saying that if I needed any help, just to ask her.”

Dolores (age 19)

Young people who face the greatest threats to graduation — those who have experienced **five or more adverse events** during their teen years — appear to need intensive, holistic support that they would not usually encounter at home or at school. This group of young people deserve continued, consistent attention from the people around them — and greater opportunities for coordinated services.

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE DESCRIBE ESTABLISHING TRUST

Consistent with previous literature on relationship building, young people we interviewed described four ways that adults or peers can build or rebuild trust in relationships with young people who have experienced a lot of instability.* They can:

- **Invest time.** Showing up once for a young person or saying that you will do something to help is not sufficient for building trust. Instead, the participants in our study talked about adults in their lives who invested significant amounts of time in listening to them or helping them.
- **“Be there no matter what.”** Time alone is not sufficient. The young people we interviewed have been through and continue to face substantial adversity. They need someone to be present and supportive when they need help, whether because they have an immediate problem to resolve or because they need help accessing resources or opportunities.
- **Empathize.** The young people we interviewed described the need to be appreciated for who they are and what they have been through. They said they need someone who can empathize with them and respond to their needs.
- **Offer help without judgment.** The young people we interviewed know they've taken some wrong turns. They need help to get back on track, and they appreciate people who can offer needed resources without judging their circumstances or their choices.

Adults and peers who show commitment over time, who offer help without judging and who express genuine care become critical bridges for young people to the critical benchmark that completing high school offers.

* For example, see Reis's (2007) four benchmarks listed in the Review of Related Literature, beginning on page 4 of the full report.

FINDING 4

Young people are more likely to graduate if they have access to a web of supportive relationships, which may include parents, adults inside and outside school and peers. At least one stable, anchoring relationship can act as a gateway to this wider Web of Support.

Our survey results show that the more sources of a support a young person has, the more likely he or she is to stay in school. Young people who face lower levels of adversity are more likely to have higher support. Young people facing more adversity, and with lower levels of support, are more likely to interrupt a positive educational trajectory.

“Resources and respect, man...when they open their doors, they open their arms too. You feel it. They don't just open the doors like here there is a class, you be there...They don't do [just] that, they're hands-on and they talk to you and they try to understand you.”

Carson (age 25)

In our interviews with young people who have already faced a high level of adversity, left school and begun to re-engage — we can clearly see that a relationship with one stable, trusted person helps pave the way toward graduation and other milestones of adult success.

This anchoring relationship allows the young person to access available community assets — his or her own personal web — and to leverage internal strengths. This trusted, stabilizing adult — an Anchor or Youth

Worker¹² — provides a foundation that allows a young person to consider new possibilities for the future and engage a Web of Support.

To put it simply, some young people may be standing in a room that contains all the support they need, but they need someone else to turn on the lights so they can see what's there and reach for it.

One caring adult, though, cannot be the sole support. The presence of an anchoring relationship is a gateway to the Web — making an array of supports visible, accessible and relevant to continuing engagement and re-engagement.

“When it comes to transportation, it's Ms. C__ and Ms. D__ and Ms. J__. When it comes to education, it's all of them. When it comes to, like I just want to get stuff off my chest it's all of them. And then when it gets really personal, to where I would get upset and shut down and block people out at some points, it would be Ms. W__ and Ms. J__.”

Carlie (age 19)

¹² See the full report for a description of how young people describe these formal and informal relationships. Briefly, an *Anchor* is someone who provides solid, unconditional support but doesn't necessarily have a formal role like a teacher, a social worker or a program director. A *Youth Worker* is an adult in a formal role, often a youth worker at a re-engagement program, who both provides and creates access to multiple types of support.



RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides new insights into how relationships can play an even more powerful role in engaging and re-engaging young people in education.

The young people we interviewed and surveyed showed us that the **strength, number and nature of relationships** in their lives are important factors that influence their engagement with school. What we learned, in part, is that small interventions can make a big difference for most youth. You don't need to be everyone to be someone for a young person.

If supportive relationships are a powerful lever for raising graduation rates—what can each of us do? Here are our recommendations for individuals and for school- and community-wide systemic change.

INDIVIDUALS

Listen.

Listen to what young people who have left school and made their way back are telling us. Young people are looking for stable connections they can depend on, not just to care about them, but also to do something for them so they can do more for themselves. They also say they're looking for support from people who respect what they're facing and offer a helping hand without judgment. How can we ensure that this happens for more young people, in more places, more of the time? That's the conversation this report encourages.

Connect.

All types of support can benefit young people—from a caring word to four quarters at the laundromat. Simple, sincere questions, like “How are you today?” or “How's your family?” can show a young person that they matter to you and that you care about their life. Young people told us they much prefer to be asked what they need, so ask how you can help and listen to the answer. If a young

person is struggling with school, you can offer help with a homework assignment. If she can't afford lunch or public transportation, you can help her navigate the free and reduced-priced lunch system or the process to get a free bus pass. Young neighbors may appreciate a few hours of free child care. [Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework](#) provides more specific actions.

Start a conversation.

Share this report as well as selected pages of the 2015 [Building a Grad Nation report](#) with your faith leader, your book group, your local high school principal, your mayor, your community's school board. Ask what your group can do to help more young people graduate on time. Choose just one thing that makes sense for your group's interests and resources and do it.

Be a mentor, tutor or coach.

If you have the qualities young people say they look for in their Anchors, their Youth Workers and their Webs, apply to be a mentor through a formal program like the ones that are part of [MENTOR's network](#), volunteer through your faith community or ask your local high school about opportunities to get involved.

Young people are looking for stable connections they can depend on, not just to care about them, but also to do something for them so they can do more for themselves.

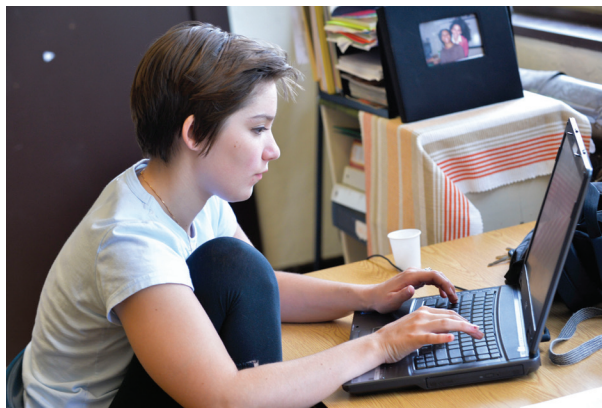
SCHOOLS

Bring the Web in.

Remove barriers to graduation by inviting community organizations that offer a variety of social services, including support for physical and mental health, into the school building. Two national nonprofits, **Communities In Schools** and **Coalition for Community Schools** offer holistic ways to do this. Extra academic support can also be provided through national service programs like those funded through **Operation AmeriCorps**.

Invest in building relationships and leveraging students' strengths.

Review these key dimensions of investing in relationships, including **time, people and training**. Use free materials and technical assistance from the **National Mentoring Resource Center** as well as these free **webinars** on specific aspects of mentoring. Consider professional development resources like **My Teaching Partner**, a specific intervention that coaches middle and high school teachers to enhance the quality of their interactions with students, as well as efforts related to socio-emotional learning such as Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's **Collaborating Districts Initiative** or **Transforming Education's Mindsets, Essential Skills, and Habits**. These tools can be more widely utilized in school settings not only with teachers, but with other school staff and with school-based volunteers.



End zero-tolerance disciplinary policies.

Being suspended or expelled more than doubles the odds that a young person won't graduate on time. Multiple research studies strongly support this finding. What's

more, several studies emphasize that significant racial and economic disparities affect school discipline. (See, for example, this 2011 **journal article**. For a more personal view, see this July 2015 **op-ed** in the *Baltimore Sun*.)

School system leaders should employ evidence-based alternatives to suspension and expulsion that keep everyone safe, create a positive learning environment and untangle the underlying causes that might lead to disciplinary action. Switching from out-of-school to in-school suspension, and giving young people the chance to make up the work they have missed, is a better way to help young people stay on track. Check out relationship-focused interventions like **Collaborative & Proactive Solutions** (CPS) or **restorative justice** practices. All of these are more graduation-friendly options than requiring a student to leave school without the opportunity to make academic progress.

Being suspended or expelled more than DOUBLES THE ODDS that a young person will interrupt their high school education.

Engage young people as peer supporters.

In both our qualitative and quantitative samples, we see evidence of peers and near-peers serving as Anchors and as part of the Web. Ask young people what they and their peers need in order to stay in school or to return. Let students know that their interest in attendance, academic achievement and graduation makes a difference to their peers. With a bit of coaching about how to give constructive feedback (appraisal and informational support), students can support each other's learning in both classroom and after-school settings. Want to learn more? The Center for Supportive Schools offers several different types of **programs and trainings** for K-12 settings.

Make it harder to leave and easier to return.

Several cities — including Boston, Chicago and Portland, Oregon — have re-engagement or re-connection centers that help young people consider their options for returning. Instead of waiting for young people to be ready to return, district and school leaders should develop

systems for intervening at or before the point of departure. Schools and districts should change policies that allow young people to leave school without an exit conversation, create early-warning systems (for example, that routinely examine and respond to attendance patterns), and connect students with supportive resources that might allow them to stay in school. Further, all districts and states should create stronger systems for sharing students' high school credits across jurisdictions to mitigate the effects of changing schools.



COMMUNITIES

Assess the risks and resources of young people in your community.

Developing a clear picture of both the risks and the resources in young people's lives is an essential foundation for strategic intervention in graduation rates. Leaders can begin by reviewing available data from a variety of sources, conducting needs assessments and undertaking community asset mapping.

Need some ideas for how to get started? The [**Building a Grad Nation report**](#), which contains numerous interactive maps and charts, is an excellent starting point for understanding who's graduating and who isn't in your state. Search Institute's [**Developmental Assets Profile**](#) offers one approach to asset mapping. To look at health-related risks, see whether your state participates in the [**Youth Risk Behavior Survey**](#); data is available from the Centers for Disease Control in several different formats. For examples of state-level surveys, take a look at the [**Iowa Youth Survey**](#), The [**California Healthy Kids Survey**](#) (which looks at resiliency and protective factors as well as risks),

or the [**Oregon Healthy Teen Survey**](#). Your local [**Mentoring Partnership**](#) can help you look at the mentoring landscape in your area. Finally, if your community has already conducted a [**GradNation Community Summit**](#), you may be able to build on discussions and data from that event.

Improve the odds that all young people have access to an Anchor or a Youth Worker — a caring adult who can connect them to a Web of other supports.

Decision makers at all levels can contribute to stronger school and community support systems for the young people they serve. All of the re-engagement programs in Appendix II of the full report offer community-based examples of this recommendation in action. Orlando, Florida, is taking this idea citywide, replicating lessons learned from the [**Parramore Kidz Zone. Friends of the Children**](#), an intensive national mentoring model, assigns an "all in" adult to a community's highest-need kindergarteners, and stays with each child through high school graduation.

School-based examples include national service programs like [**City Year**](#), whole-school-and-beyond models like [**Self Enhancement, Inc.**](#) and school-community connectors like [**Communities In Schools**](#) or [**City Connects**](#).

Emotional support + Instrumental support = Lower likelihood that young people experiencing adversity will leave school.

Engage health care professionals as allies in boosting graduation rates.

Exposure to multiple adverse experiences in childhood and beyond doesn't just affect graduation statistics. A growing body of research emphasizes the detrimental effect of adversity on physical and mental health. Someone who experiences four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences ([**ACES**](#)) is at significantly greater risk for health threats like heart disease, lung cancer, hepatitis, depression and suicide. The [**Center for Youth Wellness**](#) in San Francisco has developed a holistic model for screening, prevention and intervention in the toxic stress and poor health outcomes that multiple adverse experiences provoke. The Center has developed a free [**screening tool**](#) that health professionals

can review and adapt. It also provides **training and other resources** for parents, educators and youth-serving professionals. We urge more widespread use of similar tools in community health settings, which could make a big difference for both on-time graduation and re-engagement efforts.

Include social support systems for young people in the design of Comprehensive Community Initiatives.

Strategic plans for Comprehensive Community Initiatives (CCIs) should include a focus on ensuring that each young person has multiple opportunities to connect with the sources and types of support he or she needs. This can include culturally appropriate family engagement strategies and peer-to-peer support networks, as well as greater collaboration among agencies and organizations. Public and private funders of efforts like Promise Neighborhoods and Choice Neighborhoods can encourage attention, beginning with the planning phase, to the role that youth-serving relationships play. For more information about CCIs, see these **case studies**.



See education and youth services as an economic development investment, not a cost center.

When more young people graduate high school, they've reached one critical benchmark toward adult success. What's more, their communities gain in multiple ways—a stronger workforce, more civically engaged residents and fewer social service costs. Evidence-based programs and practices like mentoring or **national service** offer cost-

effective, high-impact ways to invest in relationships that can support young people both in and outside schools. What if every agency that serves young people and their families pooled all their resources to create an integrated youth investment strategy—with raising the graduation rate as one key indicator of success? Syracuse, New York's citywide partnership with **Say Yes to Education** offers a creative and promising approach to investing existing assets in new ways. Take a look at their **results** so far.

We believe that attention to the findings and recommendations in this report will help us get closer to our goal of a GradNation for all of America's youth. Do you have ideas about other approaches? We'd love to hear from you at **gradnation.org**.

THE FIVE PROMISES

All young people in America should be able to say that they can count on:

CARING ADULTS

parents and family members, teachers, mentors, coaches and others who believe in, challenge and nurture them.

SAFE PLACES

spaces at home, in school, in the community and online where they feel safe and have opportunities to learn, explore and grow.

HEALTHY START

the right nutrition, exercise and medical care starting with their first years so they can thrive in school and in life.

EFFECTIVE EDUCATION

to develop knowledge and real-world skills so they can fully participate in our economy and our democracy.

OPPORTUNITIES TO SERVE

to share their time and talents with others, build their character and competence, and contribute to the civic life of their community.

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The CENTER FOR PROMISE, the research institute for America's Promise Alliance, is housed at Boston University's School of Education and dedicated to understanding what young people need to thrive and how to create the conditions of success for all young people.

AMERICA'S PROMISE ALLIANCE leads a movement dedicated to making the promise of America real for every child. As its signature effort, the GradNation campaign mobilizes Americans to increase the on-time high school graduation rate to 90 percent by 2020 and prepare young people for postsecondary enrollment and the 21st century workforce.



[GradNation.org/DontQuit](https://www.gradnation.org/dontquit)
[#NotDropouts](https://twitter.com/NotDropouts)