

**Testimony of John D. Podesta  
Before the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions  
U.S. Senate**

**Hearing on “NCLB Reauthorization: Modernizing Middle and High Schools for the  
21<sup>st</sup> Century”**

**April 24, 2007**

Thank you, Chairman Kennedy, Senator Enzi, and members of the Committee. I am John Podesta, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Center for American Progress. I am also a Visiting Professor of Law at the Georgetown University Law Center.

I appreciate the opportunity to be with you today to discuss the serious and growing graduation crisis in American schools. As the Committee considers the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act, it is imperative for our nation’s economic success—and for the life chances of our children—that you examine ways to not only improve school standards and accountability but also increase the ability of states and localities to keep kids in school and move them successfully through to graduation.

I would like to talk with you today about the Graduation Promise Act (GPA), introduced yesterday by Senators Bingaman, Burr, and Kennedy, and developed with the support of the Center for American Progress, Jobs for the Future, the Alliance for Excellent Education, and the National Council of La Raza. I believe the GPA is a necessary and vital step towards improving our nation’s graduation rates. It will provide critical federal resources to aid states in their efforts to develop, implement, and expand proven methods for keeping a diverse range of students in school and on the path to economic success.

It is well established that our students have fallen behind past generations of Americans and young people in other nations in terms of on-time high school completion rates. For decades now, the U.S. on-time graduation rate has failed to top 70 percent. This is below national graduation rates recorded in the middle of the twentieth century and well below current graduation rates in other countries. The U.S. ranked first in the world in terms of secondary school graduation rates forty years ago. Today it ranks 17<sup>th</sup>.

For racial and ethnic minorities, the statistics are even grimmer. Graduation rates for African Americans and Hispanic students today range between 50 percent and 55 percent. Every year we lose more and more of these students in schools that are essentially “dropout factories,” a term used by Johns Hopkins University researchers Robert Balfanz and Nettie Letgers to describe the 2000 worst performing schools in terms of graduation rates.<sup>1</sup>

In a rapidly shifting global economy, where knowledge and skills are crucial to good paying jobs, too many of our students are falling off the track to economic independence and advancement. In turn, the lack of basic educational attainment unduly consigns millions of our young people to a life of low earnings and poverty. High school dropouts are twice as likely to be unemployed as those with diplomas; working dropouts are far more likely to have low wage jobs and fewer health and retirement benefits than others.

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<sup>1</sup> Balfanz, Robert and Nettie Letgers, “Locating the Dropout Crisis: Which High Schools Produce the Nation’s Dropouts? Where are They Located? Who Attends Them?” Report 70, Johns Hopkins University, September 2004.

It is clear that a high school diploma is the bare minimum requirement for decent work and economic security in today's world. It is thus incumbent upon all of us to do more to ensure that our students stay in school and on the path to greater intellectual achievement and improved job skills. In a nation with the resources and talent of ours, graduation should never be a "fifty-fifty" proposition for anyone.

In November of 2006, the Center for American Progress and Jobs for the Future originally proposed the Graduation Promise Act as a way for the federal government to support states in their efforts to boost graduation rates.<sup>2</sup> In a report entitled, "Addressing America's Dropout Challenge," Adria Steinberg, Cassius Johnson, and Hilary Pennington describe a range of successful state programs for improving school completion rates and propose several policies that serve as the basis for the exact bill we are discussing today.

The CAP/JFF report highlights how extended learning time, rapid response and intervention when students fail or fall behind, alongside intensive focus on language and math skills in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, all help to better prepare students for advancement to sophomore year—a strong predictor of future on-time graduation. Other research featured in the report highlights the importance of creating more challenging academic environments for potential "off-track" students, developing more direct connections between academic standards and college or job readiness requirements, and making more explicit links between high school and post-secondary college or job opportunities through greater college exposure and internships.

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<sup>2</sup> Steinberg, Adria, Cassius Johnson, and Hilary Pennington, "Addressing America's Dropout Challenge: State Efforts to Boost Graduation Rates Require Federal Support," Center for American Progress and Jobs for the Future, November 17, 2006. [<http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2006/11/graduation.html>]

Modeled on these and other efforts, the authors of the report feature a number of current state-level policies and programs to increase graduation success. For example:

- Indiana enacted the Dropout Prevention Act in 2006 to require schools to identify 9<sup>th</sup> graders who are falling behind and then advise them on ways to catch up and get additional tutorial help.
- New York City has created a program to increase “multiple pathways to graduation,” by offering students of various ages and academic achievement different options for getting back on track, including transfer schools that provide small, targeted aid for at-risk students. These schools are now graduating two to three times as many students who have fallen off the normal path than other high schools.
- Other school districts in cities from Chicago and Boston to Milwaukee and Chattanooga have put in place a range of methods for predicting which students are most likely to dropout and devised effective strategies for keeping these kids in school and improving their college and job preparedness. Graduation rates are showing signs of improvement in all of these cities.

As these state and local efforts have shown, identifying potential dropouts and then executing strategies for keeping students in school should not be an episodic process. It

requires sustained monitoring, creativity, and specialized intervention in order to succeed. Researchers and practitioners know that we can dramatically improve graduation rates, but they need more support in order for the strategies to take hold and work over time.

The Graduation Promise Act, therefore, proposes a set of federal efforts to assist states in fighting high school attrition in three primary areas: more directly interrupting the dropout crisis in the worst performing schools; developing new strategies for improving graduation rates while maintaining academic standards; and investing more in proven methods for increasing graduation rates and supporting state policies in this area.

Since Bob Wise has addressed the general problem of low performing high schools that is the core challenge addressed in the first part of GPA, let me focus on the second and third aspects of the bill.

Title II of the Graduation Promise Act authorizes the Secretary of Education to award \$60 million in competitive, peer-reviewed grants for the development, execution, and replication of promising and innovative methods to help schools prevent dropouts.

In devising this provision, the goal was to provide seed money for empirically-driven, methodologically rigorous pilot programs that will help schools increase graduation rates without sacrificing their academic standards.

As the authors of the CAP/JFF report describe, there is a useful precedent for this type of experimentation in the National Science Foundation's Statewide Systemic Initiatives Program of 1991:

*Having determined that it was critical to enable dramatic changes in the way mathematics, science, and technology were taught, Congress seeded efforts in 25 states to align policy, develop new standards and assessments, and set up research and demonstration schools that would serve as models for statewide reform. The results: demonstrable improvements in hands-on school work and small-group work in motivating student inquiries; better instructional materials; and more standards-based policies for curriculum improvements, student assessments and teacher preparations.*<sup>3</sup>

Like these past efforts, Title II of the Graduation Promise Act will offer new grants to schools, higher education institutions, nonprofit organizations, or other partnerships to develop specific ways to help current dropouts, prospective dropouts, older students, and those facing English-language barriers better navigate high school towards a goal of on-time graduation and solid preparedness for college or a career.

In determining the ultimate viability and success of these programs, and the potential worthiness for future replication, Congress and the Secretary of Education will want to explore a number of important criteria for success. For example:

- Does the intervention program lead to improvement in achievement, graduation rates, and other key school outcomes above and beyond what would have occurred without the intervention?

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<sup>3</sup> Steinberg et al, p. 17

- Why and how were these effects achieved?
- What aspect of the reform drove the effects?
- What was the role of enabling conditions (including new policies)?
- Was the cost worth it in terms of outcomes?<sup>4</sup>

To help answer these and other questions, any recipient of GPA grants will be required to collect and analyze relevant data on the success of various programs and disseminate this information to school districts and state and local education agencies. The Secretary of Education will also have the authority to commission outside, independent evaluations of these programs to measure and assess the impacts of these programs.

In addition to providing grants for innovative new programs, Title III of the Graduation Promise Act authorizes another \$40 million in competitive grants to states for devising successful policies for aligning the twin goals of achieving higher graduation rates and maintaining high academic standards and college/career readiness.

In order to avoid more “dropout factories” in America, Title III requires that each participating state first conduct a so-called gap-and-impact analysis of the policies, regulations, and laws affecting the following areas: school funding; data capacity; accountability systems; interventions in high priority secondary schools; new school

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<sup>4</sup> Steinberg et al, p. 22.

development; and dissemination and implementation of effective local school improvement activities throughout the state.

Following this analysis, states will then use their grants to develop policies to align their school systems with the methods that work best to keep students in school and better prepare them for the future.

As Indiana, New York, Louisiana, and other states have shown, there are proven methods for moving “off-track” students into alternative learning environments such as small schools and other recovery models for struggling students. States are also implementing stronger policies to align higher graduation rates with better college preparation and career-readiness targets.

But these efforts require more sustained funding in order to be given a full chance to work for consecutive generations of students. Title III of the GPA will allow more states to address the policy gaps between innovative models for graduation success and the current structure of their school systems.

Congress set a goal in 1989 that America’s schools should have a 90 percent graduation rate. Eighteen years later, roughly seven in ten students—and only half of racial and ethnic minority students—graduate on-time from high school. This is unacceptable and detrimental to our nation’s long term economic competitiveness.



Equally important, there is no reason for our nation's schools to continually return such paltry graduation numbers. Educators and policymakers know more than ever about how best to close the "graduation gap" and better situate our students in the global economy. The Graduation Promise Act would provide critical support to these efforts and would signal a strong federal commitment to prevent millions more American students from dropping out of school and limiting their opportunities in life.

The Graduation Promise Act represents practical, cost-effective, and reasonable steps toward improving the life expectations of our young people. I strongly encourage the Committee to move this bill forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and the members of the Committee, for inviting me today. I'd be happy to take any questions you may have.