

**A Case for Career and Technical Education (CTE) in
Reducing High School Dropout Rates and Youth Unemployment Among Urban Youth**

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Introduction:

This paper concerns high school youth preparedness for postsecondary endeavors, whether it be college or employment. The frame of reference used here are national high school dropout rates and their implications including youth unemployment. I will examine the possible reasons as to why students tend to drop out of high school considering the impacts of race and class. These reasons include but are not limited to the following: high stakes testing, family stressors, classroom and school experiences.

It is a widely held belief that students who have attained higher education degrees are more likely to lead successful lives. However, urban youth who are more susceptible to dropping out of high school become less marketable and thus are at a disadvantage with fewer career opportunities available to them. There are numerous reasons why students drop out of school. However, given that students begin to think more consciously about their future (whether it be pursuing an undergraduate degree or entering the workforce) during their high school career, it is imperative that the school community provides a nurturing environment for students' aspirations and ensure that students are engaged and equipped with the necessary tools which will aid in their development.

First, I will consider the individual and societal costs of dropping out of high school. This includes immediate and long term negative effects to the student as well as the economy and taxpayers. Some of the individual costs may include incarceration, teenage pregnancy, unemployment, delayed earnings, lack of proper healthcare benefits and access to basic,

necessary resources. Some societal costs may be increased tax revenues to fund public assistance programs and mass incarceration.

With youth unemployment being a hot topic since the early 2000s, high school dropouts make up a significant portion of unemployed youth. I will consider the arguments made by employers that there are jobs available which the labor pool does not support. This is tied to the high school dropout rates which correlate to students lacking the skills that enable them to be key players in American society as well as enter the middle class. It is also important to consider the opposing arguments as to whether or not there is a skills gap, or a mismatch of skills caused by high school dropouts which leads to unemployment and underemployment. Regardless of whether or not there has been a skills gap, policy makers, educators at the secondary and postsecondary levels, researchers and employers are building networks to bridge the gap between education and the workforce to allow for a better transition between the two. This is as beneficial for the individuals as it is for the economy as a whole.

Current conversations regarding high school dropouts, unemployment, the absence of skills among unprepared students and workers can be tied to similar arguments made during the 20th century. I will consider each conversation and method of reform in order to trace efforts to deal with these issues and relate them to the current climate.

In recent years, a number of methods to remedy high school dropout rates and generate better performance among students have been developed. Among them are high stakes testing, the resurgence of career and technical education and other forms of public-private partnerships.

High School Dropout Rates

In order to lead successful and rewarding lives as competent citizens, the general assumption is for students to go to school and work hard to acquire a solid education, which will eventually translate to respectable professions and higher earnings. This has been the formula for a number of years and still remains dominant. But the formula does not seem to factor in an individual's life chances - the opportunistic variables that are dependent on economic, social and political factors that allow young people, if they come from more privileged backgrounds, to lead quality lifestyles. One group of people whose life chances are slim is high school dropouts. Since education correlates to higher income and healthier lifestyles, educational deficiencies can result in poverty and poor health. Taking a look at high school dropouts holistically, the causes and costs as well as prevention methods can increase the life chances of young people at risk.

Although the U.S. high school dropout rate has decreased since 2000 from 12 percent to 7

percent,^[1] it is important that this decline continues. Looking back to the early 2000s, a study

done in 2004 by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University (CRP) and the Urban Institute,

found that while the graduation rate for white students is 75 percent, only approximately half of

Black, Latino, and Native American students earned regular high school diplomas alongside their

classmates, and that graduation rates for minority males are usually lower.^[2] In order to further

decrease dropout rates and prevent them from increasing once more, the causes of student

dropouts must be understood and remedied.

Research shows that a number of factors ranging from family structure and economic standing,

along with family stresses like divorce or death and students' school experiences contributed to

dropout rates.^[3] The National Education Association, (NEA) found that in 2000, young adults living in families with incomes in the lowest 20 percent of all family incomes were six times more likely to drop out of high school than their peers from families in the top 20 percent of the income distribution.^[4] A family's socio economic standing is the strongest predictor of high student dropout rates. Students who come from families who are on the lower end of the economic spectrum are more likely to drop out than students who do not. These students are usually from families with single or young parents and mothers who are unemployed. But who constitutes majority of the dropout rates? This question is important to consider in identifying trends in particular racial and ethnic groups and to identify structural factors that cause certain students to drop out. If we take a closer look at the statistics, young black males are more likely to drop out of high schools than their white counterparts. Not only that, but as Marc Morial, the former New Orleans mayor and president of the National Urban League exclaimed, "the dropout rate is driving the nation's increasing prison population, and it's a drag on America's economic competitiveness." With more black males at risk of dropping out of high school, they are more likely to be incarcerated.^[5] Approximately one in four young black male dropouts is incarcerated on an average day, compared to nearly one in 14 young, male, white, Asian or Hispanic dropouts.^[6] This limits their opportunity to gain employment This is burdensome on the individual and also has economic implications for the larger society.

Other factors which contribute to high school dropout rates include students' lack of interest in what they are learning in schools and high stakes testing which usually affects poorer, minority students.^[7] Students become disinterested in what is being taught in the classrooms especially if they are unable to relate or find the true relevance in application in the real world. This can spiral into a domino effect of misfortunes. These students question whether or not they are going to use what they are learning after high school. With a lack of interest, students can become disruptive to other students, which tends to get them kicked out of the classroom and into detention or even expelled based on the severity of the student's behavior. Once these students are detained or expelled, they are so removed from their regular classrooms that they become unprepared for exams which can lead to them not graduating. With a lack of engagement and failing grades, students are at risk for dropping out.

There is nothing wrong with challenging students. In fact, a student may not know their true potential until they are pushed to grow. However, there is a fine line between what is considered a good challenge and bad challenge. Students should not be put in unrealistic positions where they are being held to the same academic standards as more privileged students without extensive preparation. This can encourage failure rather than help students improve. Students may begin to lose hope and can fall through the cracks if they are being over challenged without being adequately prepared.

High School Dropout Individual and Societal Costs

Knowing the individual and societal costs of dropping out of high school is important to prompting societal responses to the issues. Evidently, life chances are negative for youth who

drop out of high schools, especially African American youth. According to 2003 U.S. Department of Labor statistics, when compared to high school graduates, high school dropouts are 72 percent more likely to be unemployed.^[8] They are unable to find jobs because they lack the necessary credentials and work experience. Students who graduate from high school, though they are not first considered for jobs when compared to college graduates, have a better chance of entering the workforce than do high school dropouts. In 2001, the unemployment rate for adults over 25 who did not have a high school diploma was 7.2 percent compared to 4.2 percent for high school graduates without any college degree and to 2.3 percent for those with a bachelor's degree or higher. In fact, high school graduates earn an annual average of \$9,245 more than students who do not complete school.^[9]

Since high school dropouts are less likely to be employed, they are unable to contribute to tax revenues. Consider that a cohort for 600,000 eighteen-year-old dropout, up to \$36 billion in state and federal income taxes annually is lost.^[10] With no income, these individuals are more likely to depend on public assistance. A report showed that approximately half of single mothers who receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are high school dropouts. This becomes taxpayers' burden - if all welfare recipients were high school graduates instead of high school dropouts, welfare costs would decrease about \$1.8 billion. On that same note, public spending on health insurance also tends to be higher for dropouts.

Youth Unemployment Rates in the U.S.

Since high school dropouts feed unemployment rates, let us look at the unemployment rates in the U.S. During the first decade of the 21st century, the unemployment rate for youth between the ages of 16 and 24 increased, which unleashed a plethora of social and economic issues.^[11]

Experts have termed this period from 2000-2010, the “Lost Decade,” referring to the striking all time high unemployment rate of 19.5% among youth in 2010.^[12] To clarify, these

unemployment rates relate to individuals who are available to work but are not working and actively seeking employment. Since unemployment rates tend to be misleading, a study done by The Brookings Institution, analyzed the employment rates as well as labor force underutilization rates to get a holistic picture of youth unemployment.

For high school graduates who did not go on to pursue a post-secondary education, the employment rates were as low as 28% in 2011.^[13] However, this should not take us by surprise

as education correlates with job opportunities. In essence, the more education one attains the likelihood of finding employment increases. In addition, the employment rate among young adults (ages 20-24) fell from 72 percent in 2000 to 60 percent in 2011.^[14] Irrespective of

educational level, labor force underutilization increased among all teens. In 2011, underutilization for high school dropouts was 57%, while for high school graduates not pursuing post-secondary education the underutilization rate was 48% and 28% for college students.

Taking ethnicity into account, the underutilization rate was highest among blacks which was 60% with 52%, 48%, and 35% for Hispanics, Asians and whites respectively.^[15]

Youth Unemployment and Long Term Effects

Lack of early work experience can have long-term negative effects on employment, earnings, social life and the economy. While an increase in youth unemployment can be tied to more enrollment in schools, there is a job deficit among people who are seeking employment and cannot find jobs. In fact, the employment-to-population ratio for teenagers and young adults has declined since the 1980s.^[16] According to a new analysis by the Center for American Progress, young Americans will lose \$20 billion in earnings over the next decade, which are about 22,000 per person.^[17] This of course results in lower spending power which is bad for the economy, reducing the number of jobs being created. It was found that men who are unemployed for at least six months of their youth at age 22 earned 8 percent less at age 23 than they would have otherwise; by age 26, the men earned 6 percent less, and by age 31, their wages were 3 - 4 percent lower than they otherwise would have been.^[18] Although this wage gap decreases with age, delayed work experience tends to replace workers instead of adding them to the labor pool. High levels of youth unemployment also contribute to increased fiscal burdens on the government, with lower tax revenues (\$4,100 annually), costing federal and state governments an annual amount of approximately \$8.9 billion in providing safety nets. If taxpayers were to directly pay the costs, there would be an additional \$53 to every American taxpayer's annual federal tax bill.^[19]

These levels of economic disadvantages for unemployed youth also results in social implications. These youth become disengaged and disinterested citizens, not actively participating in elections

due to a lack of hope. They also give up looking for jobs they are unable to find which further increased the underutilization labor rates. These youth are also marginalized, causing them to suffer from depression, self-hate and lack of confidence. History even shows that an increase in the number of disengaged, underserved and underprivileged youth results in an increase in crime and incarceration rates which further disadvantages families and whole communities that are deserted and left in urban decay.

The Debate about Skills Mismatch and whether it Caused Youth Unemployment

These high unemployment rates are worrying for employers as well. Employers have been complaining that they are unable to find enough skilled workers. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that there were approximately 4 million unfilled jobs in the United States in October 2013.^[20] Another study shows that 1/3 of the U.S. unemployment rate is as a result of a mismatch between skills and open jobs. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Labor also predicted that for 2006 to 2016, 22 (75%) of the 30 fastest growing occupations, will require more than a high school degree. Since these new jobs require higher skills that are hard to find among American youth, economists and policy makers have declared that there is a skills gap. A New York Times article states that “the American economy rewards skill very well,” especially since the implementation of universal high schools, “but the supply hasn’t responded.”^[21] In fact, one in five high school student leaves without a diploma.^[22] It also stated that American college graduates perform worse than their peers in other countries, looking better with certificates than

skills.^[23] So if there are jobs available why is there a concern about the youth unemployment rate?

There has been much debate around whether or not there has been a skills gap with research disputing that this was ever true. The argument is that the fastest growing occupations that require more than a high school degree refers to jobs in the network systems, data communications analysts, computer software engineers, and financial advisors which are only 3% of all U.S. jobs.^[24] This simply means that there is not skills mismatches since majority of the jobs available are lower skilled jobs specifically in the food services industry.^[25] The U.S. Department of Labor also found that the retail sales person occupations have had the most job growth in 2014.^[26]

So then why create hysteria about a skills mismatch? Reasons for such misattribution can be either psychological, political or both.^[27] Psychologically, researchers are saying that blaming the workers for a lack of skills is a cop out to pointing out the real problem. This blame-the-victim not the system rationale is much easier to digest. Politically, high unemployment rates are a government issue thus it requires a government response. If research suggests that a high unemployment rate is a result of a lack of skilled workers to fill the job openings, then more efforts need to be taken in order to educate and train citizens. It assumes that people are not being trained for the jobs that are available and much more needs to be done at the federal level to combat this. This would of course be beneficial to individuals but for the

economy as a whole, creating more jobs with more people having an increase in purchasing power. This would also decrease poverty rates and a decrease in crime rates would follow suit.

21 Century High Youth Unemployment Rates Mirror that of 1983 “A Nation at Risk”

This conceptual that unemployment is tied to a lack of skills mirror the rationale for studies done in the 20th century. In 1975, the youth unemployment rate was 20% which was attributed to an unskilled and uneducated labor force.^[28] This caused a growing fear to sweep across the nation, that a lack of skilled workers was a threat to America’s global and economic prominence. The National Commission on Excellence in Education released a report, “A Nation at Risk,” in 1983 which was a critique on American students’ low achievement on test scores in comparison with their international counterparts as well as a catalyst for education reform. The report begins by asserting, “Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world,” (insert footnote) referring to deficiencies such as the illiteracy among 23 million American adults; illiteracy among minority 17 year olds; and low achievement on standardized scores to name a few.^[29] There was a great fear among education experts that America, which had emerged as a world power over the years, would no longer produce the best and the brightest. This would hamper advancements and dominance in out-innovating its competitors - Japan, Korea, and Germany. A great fear that the American people would become disenfranchised, and without the “skill,” “literacy,” and “training,” which are “essential” to the new economy.^[30]

Skill possession needed to become more than just a requirement, but instead a distinguishing feature of the American culture.

One major problem, according to the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, was that America had the worst school-to-work transition programs in comparison to its industrial competitors.^[31] The curriculum was not conducive to the needs of youth who were not

college-bound. Employment opportunities for them were bleak; there was no certification to attest to their accomplishments; and certainly no incentives for working hard in school due to the ineffective transition system from school-to-work. In the 1950s, it was much easier for youth who dropped out of high school to find employment due to the high demand for low-wage laborers in the manufacturing economy. In the 1990s however, the chances of youth not bound for college to find a job grew slim as employers were seeking highly skilled and educated workers.

The General Accounting Office (GAO) also criticized America's neglect for non-college bound youth, in that schools allocated more resources toward college-bound students, although the percentage of student who completed a four-year degree was a mere 23%.^[32]

In response, President Clinton's Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich introduced the School-To-Work (STW) or school-to-careers program which led to the 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act (STWOA), encouraging states to rethink and revamp their education systems^[33] As a part of this initiative, there were three major components states could

implement: School-based learning, Work-based learning and connecting activities. School-based

learning refers to the integration of academic and vocational instruction which includes at least two years of secondary education and one to two years of postsecondary education. Work-based learning, provided students the opportunity to gain mentorship on workplace etiquette and work experience. Connecting activities required the participation of employers to provide a seamless transition from secondary to postsecondary through schools and work based learning.^[34] The ultimate aim was to “improve career prospects and academic achievement in high school, and thereby boost enrollment in postsecondary education and increase the likelihood of high-skill, high wage employment.”^[35] It was important that what students were learning in the classrooms was transferable to skills and traits that employers sought which required continued collaboration among researchers, educators, employers, and policymakers.

Of course, these school-to-work programs were met with some criticism. One opposing factor was that these programs detract from student academic gains as if success is independent of “the application of that knowledge.”^[36] This is not true, however, since “a critical element of fostering learning is to have students carry out tasks and solve problems in an environment that reflects the multiple uses to which their knowledge will be put in the future.”^[37] Both theory and practice are more beneficial than if either of these forms of learning stand alone.

In spite of these criticisms, one way to determine whether or not school-to-work programs were effective is to gain students’ perspectives. Esther R. Johnson, 1997 conducted a study assessing students’ perceptions. The study concluded the following: students were able to see the relevance

of school-to-work. Moreover, program participation led to progress in overall academic performance improved.^[38]

Addressing the 21st Century Skills Gap/Unemployment

Today, regardless of whether or not there is a skills gap, the research proving that there is a skills gap have prompted employers, educators and policymakers to make drastic changes in bridging the gap between secondary and postsecondary education and the workforce, which is beneficial to all the parties involved. There has been an attempt to revive Vocational Education to what is now Career and Technical Education (CTE).

Regardless of whether students are receiving vocational or career and technical education, it is important that they are applying their knowledge to real world experiences which better prepares them for post-secondary endeavors. Both types of education should teach skills that are relevant, useful and transferrable. To cultivate and harness these skills among today's youth for tomorrow's employment, there has been more focus on improving CTE schools and public-private partnerships to bridge the gap between education and the work force.

New York City CTE high schools

In 2008, a study entitled Schools That Work was completed which prompted Mayor Michael Bloomberg to include the city's career and technical education (CTE) high schools in his plan to improve the school system. The study recommended that in order to create a working model to integrate knowledge and experiences, there needed to be a shift in thought and perception of career and technical education from all stakeholders, including policy makers, parents, and students. A college education is a great equalizer to successful careers with rewarding pay; however it is not the only way. This is of course not to argue against college in efforts to deter

young people away from college. It is simply providing another alternative for students who either choose to enter the workforce to gain more experience and exposure, which will allow them to narrow their focus if and when they do decide to pursue higher education in the future. This puts them on a path better suited to guide their career choice instead of being forced to go to college because it seems like the right thing to do. Oftentimes, students who enter college aimlessly, without a clear sense of why they are there, do poorly. Not having a clearly defined purpose can lead to difficult undergraduate years with students failing to meet requirements and thus becoming wayward and disinterested. These are the prerequisites for dropping out of college without even attaining a degree. Now these students would be in a worse position, accruing financial debt, losing time, psychologically distressed, without experiences to get good paying jobs.

The report also suggested that CTE programs would be more effective if they involved guest speakers incorporated site visits and have partnerships through internships with businesses in the fields of the trainings they offered.

Schools that offer career and technical education (CTE) are a valuable asset to the education system in New York City. They are very similar in nature to vocational schools that also served students and their communities. They provide a dual form of education where students are not only required to meet high academic standards like those of regular academic-based high schools, but also for careers in a wide range of fields: nurse assistants, electricians, subway maintenance technicians, IT support workers, aircraft mechanics and chefs.^[39] According to the research I have consulted, students at CTE schools within NYC have proven to have higher graduation rates and are four times less likely to dropout than students who attend

academics-only institutions.^[40] These schools even boast attendance rates which are above the high school city average. In addition, students who graduate from CTE schools who continue on in post-secondary education tend to outperform other students. Even those students who choose to immediately enter the workforce tend to have higher earning power than those who do not. In fact, CTE students are prepared for well-paying industries that are and will always be in demand, like technology and healthcare to name a few.

At the onset of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's career in 2002, as standards-based testing became the mantle for determining students' and schools' success and preparation for college admissions, NYC CTE schools were neglected and enrollment plummeted from 118,892 from 2002-2003 to 103,172 between 2006- 2007.^[41] In comparison to public high schools that offer

general academic programs, (non-CTE), the demographic in terms of race, class and gender is very different. CTE schools tend to serve a population of poor and minority students who are at risk of becoming high school dropouts. In 2005, 64.2 percent of students qualified for free lunch.^[42] In 2007 44 percent of students within CTE schools were Hispanic, while 43 percent

and 8 percent were African-American and white respectively.^[43] Although CTE schools have proven to do exceptionally well, even with a new name they were still shunned and considered appropriate only for students who are not-college bound earlier, at the start of the century.

In terms of gender segregation, there are more males that attend CTE schools than general academic schools. Overall, the ratio of males to females in the city's public schools is 51 percent

to 49 percent, respectively.^[44] However, among the 22 CTE schools, the ratio of males to females is 58 percent to 42 percent.^[45] This gender difference tends to be attributed to the fact that traditionally, gender crossover in jobs is not widely favored. Despite efforts to dispel gendered jobs the idea that men are to perform more strenuous jobs that require heavy lifting and technological intricacies while females are to assume more care-taking roles persist.

CTE Funding

Although vocational and career and technical schools have been serving the city well for a number of years, they were still considered a second-class form of education and thus treated as such. Funding for CTE schools are allocated by city and federal resources with the latter supplementing school budgets. According to a 2007 study done by the New York City Independent Budget Office (IBO) on the 22 CTE high schools, per pupil funding allocated to students at vocational high schools were lower than for students who attended regular academic based high schools.^[46] On average, general public high schools per pupil spending was about \$11,326, compared to \$10,575 per pupil spending for CTE, a difference of \$750. This was due to new policy changes in 2004 under Chancellor Klein in efforts to “reduce some of the disparities in school budgets,” and avoid wild year-to year swings in school budgets.”^[47]

In terms of state and federal standards for vocational schools and programs, standards are set by the State Education Department, with the vocational schools being subject to No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) as other city school. Of the programs offered by vocational high schools,

only 29 percent have been certified by the state and the 22 vocational high schools have not received state approval for all of their programs.^[48] In order to be certified by the state, CTE programs require certified teachers, local industry representatives' approval, and compliance with the state's instructional guidelines. Students who are in state-approved CTE programs take both the Regents examinations as well as industry exams which enable them to receive a technical endorsement on their high school diplomas. This is not a graduation requirement for the city, but only programs that have been approved by the state can offer industry certification which allows students to get entry level jobs post-graduation.

However there are challenges that these CTE programs face. Firstly, it is difficult to recruit and retain certified CTE teachers. Secondly, just about nine of the 22 vocational schools were meeting the No Child Left Behind standards.^[49] For schools that failed to meet these standards, they are restructured into Small Learning Communities (SLC) which are perceived to be more manageable and generate better results.

One prime example of the vocational education phase out is the Alexander Hamilton Vocational High School in Crown Heights which underwent restructuring twice. The school had an enrollment of 1200 students with only 135 graduating students in the 1982-1983 period.^[50]

With a high dropout rate coupled with low attendance and performance rates, Chancellor Anthony Alvarado declared the Crown Heights School to be failing and deserved to be closed. The school was closed in 1984 and was reopened as the Paul Robeson High School, with a new structure and vision to combat the issues that plagued its predecessor.

Robeson opened in partnership with the Wall Street firm Salomon Brothers and was doing extremely well.^[51] The school was very selective in admitting students - they had screening devices such as interviews with potential students, a school pre-entrance test and an assessment of parental involvement.^[52] Thus, they were doing well having a concentration of high performing students and high graduation rates. However, in 2002, the school suddenly started failing and was at risk to be closed down.^[53] Metal detectors were now a part of the decor and a child care center was created for the teenage mothers who made use of it. Violence had also crept into the school, with stabbings and gang activities, while attendance rates plummeted, with 63 percent of students missing more than a month of school and 43 percent missing over two months during the 2007-2008 period.^[54] Stefanie Siegel, a teacher at the time gave her account of what was happening: "...we started having a lot of incidents, gang issues, things that didn't come into the building before that...this is the story of all the schools that got closed down. We had the lowest dropout rates in the city, kids didn't leave, but it wasn't balanced. What it became was over 30 percent high-needs students, and no institution can survive that sudden change."^[55]

What could have possibly caused such a drastic change? One explanation attributes this to Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Joel Klein's education plan to close down large high schools and create smaller schools expected to generate higher performance and better results. As a result, Robeson became a dumping ground for students who were now displaced since their schools

were no longer in operation. Many of these students had records of truancy and delinquency and were too old for their grade levels. The school's enrollment had increased, faced with the challenges of serving the needs of underperforming students. This changed the whole culture of the school and it was no longer attractive to high performing students. Efforts have been made to restructure the school with the creation of Small Learning Communities but were met with opposition from teachers who were not on board with this new model.^[56] With a lack of cooperation, the school's progress continued to decline and by 2011 it was placed on a the city's school closure list. According to the NYC Department of Education, in the latter years of the decade, Robeson was receiving C on its Progress Report as well as a C grade on Student Performance, a B grade on Student Progress, and a D grade on School Environment which put the school in the bottom 25% of all high schools.^[57] This resulted in a phase out and replacement plan for the school which began in 2011 and was scheduled to be completed by 2014. This meant that Robeson was to be replaced by a set of new, smaller schools. Phasing out Paul Robeson High School required a number of procedures: 10th -11th grade students who were not on track to graduate were to meet with their guidance counselors to discuss options of either remaining at Robeson or transferring; students who were repeating the 9th grade as well as students in the 10th and 11th grades who were on track to graduate were to remain at Robeson on the condition that they continue to earn credits on schedule, receiving guidance and support as needed; first-time ninth grade students had the option to either remain at Robeson or complete the High School Admissions Process to apply to different schools as a 10th

grader in September 2011. This meant that the school was no longer accepting incoming freshmen and would continue to phase out until 2014.^[58]

Another explanation blamed the Department of Education for forcing Robeson to accept students who were not performing well which in turn caused the school to fail. In 1986, the NYC Board of Education called for a more lenient model to select prospective students in order to give everyone a fair shot of applying.^[59] As mentioned before, Paul Robeson High School had a highly selective application process which screened students before they were admitted. However, with the Board's intervention, half of the students admitted to Robeson would be determined by a random computer selection. There would be a pool of applicants with 68% reading at grade level, 16 percent reading above grade level and 16 percent reading below grade level.^[60]

Paul Robeson High School was one to be affected by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2000 and the Common Core Standards initiative that that was introduced in 2009. Both education reform efforts were designed to improve schools performance levels and to create more college and career ready students which would be more beneficial for the students, their families and their communities. Signed by President George W. Bush, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) brought about new academic standards to test reading and math proficiency. Under this new law, states were required to increase the proficiency (proficiency being defined subjectively) level among their all students, by the 2013-14 school year. Therefore, states began testing students in reading and math in grades 3

through 8 and once in high school and reporting these results. States were also required to hire more highly qualified teachers and would receive Title I funding if they are compliant with all that is required of them. If states failed to comply year over year however, since they were tracked by their “adequate yearly progress,” (AYP) schools would be divided into smaller schools or closed down. This is what happened with Paul Robeson High school, since it was not on target with the new standards.^[61]

But the NCLB Act has proven to do more harm than good, especially to urban schools which serve mostly students of color and students living in poverty.^[62] Given the AYP, if schools are not making progress, they will be shut down. But what exactly does the AYP indicate? Looking deeper into what the AYP actually means, schools are evaluated on “whether the aggregated and disaggregated test scores exceed the threshold, even if their scores fall.” Therefore, if schools start off with low test scores but have made significant improvements, if the score remains under the threshold the schools are still deemed to be failing. Unfortunately poor and minority students are usually the ones affected because “test scores strongly correlate with a student’s family income.”^[63] Thus, failing schools in New York State are usually within poor urban school districts. In fact, during the first year of NCLB, 83% of the failing schools were located in the big five urban districts: New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers.^[64] Another problem with NCLB was that standardized tests were proven to be an ineffective method to determine students’ competencies. Also, with a narrower, more focused

curriculum, teachers were facing the difficulty of engaging relevant topics to students' own experiences.^[65]

Failing to learn from past mistakes, continuing on the same stream of accountability and standards-based learning, the Common Core Standards initiative was the new reform to address the shortcomings of the NCLB Act.^[66] There was a fear that states were not being aggressive

enough in creating rigorous standards so efforts were made to standardize the tests for all students across the nation. What also contributed to this initiative was a 2004 report titled *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*. In the report, it was found that both employers and colleges are demanding more high school graduates than before. The report highlighted a major problem that high school graduates did not possess the skills and knowledge to transition to college or the workforce. It argued that the high school diploma does not prepare students for the real world, and with about 90 percent of students in the 8th grade who are planning to pursue higher education degrees, this needs to change.^[67] The report shows that

more than 70 percent of graduates move on to postsecondary education with 28 percent of them taking remedial math and English courses.^[68] If students were being prepared enough

throughout their high school careers they would not have to waste time and money to take these remedial courses for which they were receiving no college credit. In addition, although a majority of high school graduates go on to college, a little less than half leave with a degree, a problem which disproportionately affected the Black and Hispanic populations. To the point that high schools are not preparing students for the workforce, over 60 percent of employers are

skeptical as to whether a high school diploma translates to the basic skills, rating their math and English skills a poor. The report suggested that policymakers at the state level should ensure that high school graduation requirements and assessments mirror the standards of the real world, referring to the knowledge and skills that colleges and employers are actually looking to attract, retain and enhance. Thus, the Common Core Standards were implemented to “ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live.”^[69]

So, the Common Core which placed even more emphasis on high-stakes testing, was designed to weed out low performing students, teachers and schools, holding them accountable should they fail to improve. Policy makers relied on test results to predict students’ college and career readiness ability. However, this was not the case as high stakes testing is not an accurate measure of students’ true abilities. Thus, the Common Core Standards added to the problem of unprepared and unskilled students, rather than remediated it. States were not required to adopt the Common Core Standards but were offered incentives through the Race to the Top.^[70]

Though with good intentions to develop well rounded students, these new standards posed a threat to vocational programs, affecting poor, minority, and low performing students.

Today, what was once Paul Robeson High school, is now Pathways in Technology Early College High School, (P-Tech) as a part of Bloomberg and Klein’s agenda break up bigger schools into smaller schools. The Pathways in Technology Early College (P-TECH) 9-14 School Model is a network of secondary and postsecondary education with on the job training and professional development. Launched by IBM in 2011, P-TECH has served as a model for now

40 schools within the U.S. and 70 industry partners. With no specific grades or exams required for admission, all students are able to attend and within six years, they can earn their Associate's degree in a STEM field along with their high school diploma free of cost. To ensure that students graduate career-ready, students are able to engage with mentors and guest speakers, participate in project-based learning activities, workplace visits, internships, and apprenticeships. This dual-model allows them the opportunity to continue on to pursue higher education or begin a rewarding career in the STEM field. The first of its kind, Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) was opened in Brooklyn in 2011 in partnership with the New York City Department of Education, the City University of New York, New York City College of Technology and IBM.^[71]

Other Methods to Create College and Career Ready Students

By now we should know that high stakes testing for high school students is an inaccurate and ineffective method for determining whether students are prepared for college and career. In fact, they do a better job at “naming and shaming of labeling schools as failing.”^[72] A comparison was done between The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) gains from 1996-2003 to 2003-2009 which found that gains prior to NCLB were better than the gains after the implementation of NCLB which is quite disheartening. The comparison showed that after NCLB was implemented, scores for math and reading either declined or stopped rising. Common Core is not much different and

does not offer new results. Critics have argued that there are other factors that contribute to students' success than test scores, which need to be taken into consideration.^[73]

Combatting Youth Unemployment Rate

If we are going to make an impact on youth unemployment, our schools need to prioritize employment skills and work experience. Programs that are usually successful integrate both academic, training and work-readiness to “equip young people with the academic, occupational, and personal skills they need to succeed.”^[74] One model that has been proven effective is the integration of work-based learning opportunities into high school and college education.

Work-based learning allows students to learn technical, academic, and employability skills having been exposed to the real work environment. Programs like these, including internships, co-ops, and apprenticeships teaches skills like problem-solving, teamwork, communication, and critical thinking. This integration of knowledge and experience makes learning more relevant to students and can create opportunities, especially for low-income and minority students.

Opportunity Nation, a bipartisan campaign has released a 5 step plan to promote youth employment in the U.S. This plan requires the cooperation of youth and community leaders, employers, nonprofit, philanthropic and educational institutions and policy makers.^[75] The first step is to train youth through work-based learning initiatives. Youth and community leaders should support and promote policy initiatives geared towards expanding relevant and modernized career and technical training for students. Work-based learning can be costly and time consuming for employers. However, being able to influence what students are being taught

can be beneficial for businesses as they create a labor pool specific to their businesses. Although businesses might have issues with retention, harnessing young talent not only increases their exposure and attracts more business, but they develop employees who are innovative, adding value to the company and its brand. With that, employers should open their doors to eager youth, through internships, apprenticeships, volunteer opportunities, any form of work-based learning. Nonprofits, philanthropic and educational institutions should partner with businesses and educators at various levels partnerships. Policymakers should provide incentives for employers to hire and train youth. This speaks to the second step which is to hire youth and increase employer demand for young talent. The third step is to include mentorship in ongoing training. The fourth step is for the graduation rate among youth to increase dramatically, not just academically but also with transferable skills. The fifth step is to revive opportunities for nonviolent youth offenders to be integrated into society, gaining education and skill sets to lead rewarding lives.

There are models in place that are dedicated to providing the right tools for youth to succeed. Take for instance the “New Skills at Work” initiative at J.P. Morgan that was launched in 2013. New Skills at Work was prompted by the research done around high unemployment rates in the face of available high-skilled jobs. J.P. Morgan’s Corporate Responsibility arm has dedicated \$250 million to close the skills gap through an analysis of the skills in demand and gaps left unfilled; investments to strengthen effective workforce training programs to satisfy employment demands and sharing in findings and strategies across sectors.^[76]

Another model is the Fellowship Initiative also sponsored by J.P. Morgan, dedicated to provide professional development and training for young men of color. TFI started in 2010 in NYC and

has expanded to the Chicago and Los Angeles area. The 24 fellows that have completed the program boast 100% graduation rates, and have been accepted into 4-year colleges with \$8.4 million in awards and scholarship funds. In preparation to launching this program, there was a need to be addressed. Young men of color lacked the support and educational resources and opportunities they need because they came from economically disadvantaged communities. These young men face high poverty rates, usually drop out of high school and face incarceration. As mentioned before, generally, graduation rates have increased nationwide. However, the graduation rates for young men of color are far below that compared to their non-minority counterparts. To combat these issues and make a difference, J.P. Morgan's mission is to:

“help TFI's Fellows acquire the skills, knowledge and experiences they need to succeed in high school and college. Unlocking real opportunity requires a broad-based and integrated approach – one that enhances the quality of the educational, social, emotional and economic aspects of the young men's lives. The TFI approach incorporates multiple points of interaction with the Fellows and involves the commitment of our employees' time as well as our financial resources.”^[77]

Fellows were required to give up their Saturdays to participate in the program three Saturdays each month, attend after-school sessions twice a month, and engage in intensive summer programming at least a month. They receive academic enrichment, experiential learning, leadership development, social and emotional support and college admissions coaching. Even the families of the fellows were engaged to better understand the college preparedness process. In addition to CTE schools, there needs to be more programs like this incentivized by tax breaks if necessary. In this way, more students can be reached and lives transformed.

Problems with 20th Century Vocational Education

The problems with vocational education - a type of school-to-work based program - in the 20th century was that students were learning one type of skill for a particular type of job which would employ them for life. Students were learning skills to become either builders, plumbers, masons, electricians, welders or technicians.^[78] “Once you become a welder, you’ll always be a welder.

Or once you become a cosmetologist, you’ll always be a cosmetologist,” says one

researcher.^[79] This was reasonable, in the post WWII years given the economic climate with an upsurge in good jobs for people who only had a high school education which made up 26% of middle class workers.^[80] However, as technology advanced due to the increase in globalization,

new levels of education and skills were required for the new jobs being created. This meant that the good jobs that required just a high school education were disappearing. “To be successful in this kind of economy, experts say workers have to be multi-skilled and able to retrain for new jobs throughout their careers. Everyone needs a good academic foundation in order to do that, experts say, and most kids in vocational programs were not getting that foundation.”^[81]

Another problem with vocational education was that it began losing credibility when low-income and underperforming students as well as students with disabilities were being tracked off into these schools. They became a dumping ground for poor and minority students which segregated them from the academic curriculum which was geared towards more middle- and upper-class students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Students tend to drop out of high school for a number of reasons. High school dropouts are usually from homes with lower economic standing and are usually minorities. Family stressors like death of a loved one, divorce, poor parenting, single or young parents tend to contribute to students dropping out of school. Sometimes students also work during their high school career to meet family needs, which can interfere with their studies then forcing them to choose between helping out at home and getting an education. Such a decision is not black and white and can be stressful for these students. Students can also lose interest in what they are learning in the classrooms if the teachers and the lessons are not engaging and relevant. High stakes testing can also pose a threat to students' achievement if they are not doing well, which usually affects poor and minority students. Not only that, but high stakes testing is not a true predictor of students achievement, intellect and ability, nor is it a true predictor of career and college readiness. In fact, it is common for students to cram and study for exams and once it is over, they forget much of the material.

There are individual and societal costs to high dropout rates. Once out of high school, the life chances for these students become slim. Compared to their peers, they do not do not have an array of job and career options once they stop going to school. The probability of high school dropouts becoming teenage parents or being incarcerated is high. They tend to be concentrated in poor, deserted neighborhoods where there are a lack of healthy food options, good public schools and good role models. High school dropout rates are direct feeders into the unemployment numbers. This has both individual and national consequences and costs. Since high school dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, they are not able to contribute to tax revenues. They are also more likely to be dependents of public assistance and subsidized health care which

increases the taxpayers' burden. If students do not rise from these poor conditions, generations of people faced with the same issues will be created.

Additionally, the youth unemployment rate is worrying and employers are having a hard time filling their job openings with the right candidates possessing the right skills. Whether or not there is a skills gap, employers, educators and policymakers are now taking on the responsibility of educating our youth of today in preparation for jobs tomorrow. Left to disintegrate in the early 2000 were the CTE schools that are now getting more attention. These schools are committed to providing students with an array of skills and knowledge that are useful in today's economy.

There should be more high schools with this type of model being created, partnering with businesses in various fields.

To help with college and career efforts, private companies like J.P. Morgan are leading new initiatives to cultivate and harness young talent, helping the youth of underserved communities to prepare for college and the workforce. More companies should get involved and expand these efforts. Funding schools can be very expensive but with a pool of educators, policymakers, researchers, employers and parents, the multitude can share the burden of providing resources, whether that means monetarily or equipment. Also, to encourage more businesses to get on board with these efforts and increase involvement as a part of their corporate responsibility, they should receive tax breaks and incentives to provide mentors, career coaching and on the job training for students.

Although students enrolled in schools that offer career and technical education are doing exceptionally well, enrollment is lower than what it used to be. This is due to the fact that the stigma these schools carry, that they serve only poor and minority students who are not college

bound, still remains. Also, more males than females are enrolled in these schools. One suggestion is to market these schools differently. While CTE schools serve particular demographics and have caused the graduation rates among these students to increase, this method of learning can be beneficial to all students, irrespective of race, gender or class. Thus, in order to increase enrollment in these schools, there needs to be more creativity and accuracy in the marketing that is put into these schools. Cosmetology is not just for females, and engineering is not just for males. Parents and school officials should encourage their students to take advantage of the programs that are being offered. Perhaps there could be more television ads promoting career and technical learning at schools that offers these classes or schools that are fully dedicated to CTE programs. Students are more inclined to participate, learn and contribute when they can relate what they are being taught to how they can apply their skills. As the research shows, this can increase graduation rates and lower dropout rates. Students can aspire to a career and know that the steps to achieve their goal can be taken while still in high school. Also, students who need to work in order to support their families can work in jobs related to their field of interest through paid internships. So while they are learning the necessary transferable skills to middle class success, they can still focus on their studies and help their families instead of working in a job unrelated to what they might be interested in.

There needs to be ongoing research to identify job and career projections for the future and ensure that educators are up-to-date with changes to come and better prepare. There is no use in preparing students for jobs that do not exist or will knowingly not exist. Students being exposed to an array of career options will make more informed post-graduation decisions, whether it is to directly enter the workforce or attend college right away. The mindset that college is the only

way to success needs to be thrown out the window, making accommodation for public-private collaboration with schools.

To the issue of recruiting and retaining Career and Technical Education teachers, there are solutions proposed by a recent study. There are three ways by which teachers can become certified to teach in CTE schools: The first option is by completing an approved CTE teacher preparation program at either the New York State public universities - New York City College of Technology of the City University of New York in Brooklyn, the State University of New York at Oswego and Buffalo State College of the State University of New York in Buffalo; the second option is acquiring a Transitional A certificate, for individuals who has at least four years of experience in a particular trade which allows them to teach while they are completing the initial teaching certificate; thirdly, teachers who have met certification requirements and have trade experience can apply through the State education Department where they undergo evaluations for consideration.^[82] The SVA program, which is a successful model of CTE teacher

recruitment and retention, differs in that it prepares graduates of CTE high schools to become CTE teachers over the course of five and a half years. Established in 1984, the program integrates the city Department of Education, the teachers union, and a public university where participants are committed to a little over five years of a salaried teaching internship, college level academic study, and relevant work experience in industry.^[83] The study also suggested

that in order to attract students with associate degrees in technical areas, students' tuition can be subsidized for the courses that require certification. These students are close to the field and can

provide a wealth of knowledge and experience for students, as well as become part of their networks to guide them into their futures.

Ultimately, it is imperative that we continue to take preventative measures to connect young people with the workforce who will further decrease high school dropout rates as well as unemployment rates. This not only satisfies their immediate economic needs but also prevents long-term negative effects on their earnings, health and the economy in general. In the end, everyone benefits.

Appendix:

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[83] Ibid. 26