



**Acceleration
Academies**

WHITE PAPER

The Economic and Social Benefits of Re-Engaging High School Dropouts

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The contents of this white paper are provided for informational purposes only. All information, data, and statements herein are based on available research, interviews, and records as of September 2025, and are presented in good faith.

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1

Executive Summary

Re-engaging high school dropouts and disengaged students creates life-changing benefits for young people, while also strengthening communities and economies.

Students who return to complete high school earn higher incomes, experience better health, and contribute more actively to civic life. Districts and states see reduced social service costs, stronger workforce pipelines, and increased tax revenues.

While traditional four-year graduation rates exceed 85%, students in re-engagement programs often graduate later or through alternative pathways. When those pathways are considered, many more succeed. This underscores the importance of programs that meet students where they are—with flexible structures, comprehensive student supports, and individual learning plans.

Acceleration Academies (AA) partners with districts to bring disengaged students back into school. Across sites, AA students are demonstrating strong progress in course completion, credit recovery, and persistence—proof that when given the right environment, young people who once seemed “lost” can thrive.



THE IMPACT OF RE-ENGAGEMENT

+\$305,000

Average increase in lifetime earnings for each young person who completes high school versus dropping out.

(Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023)

\$345,000

Average increase in social savings from reduced reliance on public assistance, lower health care expenses, and lower incarceration rates.

(NCES, 2019)

2X MORE LIKELY

Re-engaged graduates are twice as likely to report good or excellent health compared to peers who remain dropouts.

(CDC, 2022)

OVER 40%

Share of re-engaged students who come from groups facing steep challenges—low-income households, English learners, or special education students.

(NCES, 2023)

Economic Benefits

Each additional high school graduate contributes an estimated \$345,000 in lifetime tax revenues and reduced social costs.

Health and Social Benefits

High school completers have longer life expectancy, lower rates of chronic illness, and higher civic participation than dropouts.

Program Effectiveness

Re-engagement programs consistently help students who were far off track reach graduation or credential attainment.

Overcoming Challenges

Alternative Education programs disproportionately serve groups of young people who face the steepest hurdles—low-income youth, multilingual learners, special education students, and those affected by family or criminal justice system challenges.



Bottom Line: Re-engagement programs work. With targeted investment, flexible policies, and recognition of extended graduation pathways, states and districts can unlock opportunities for young people while building stronger communities.

1.2

Objective



High school dropout rates in the United States remain a critical and persistent challenge, affecting over a million students yearly.

While overall graduation rates have improved over the past two decades, deep and lasting gaps remain for low-income students, special education students, English learners, and those involved in the juvenile justice system. These dropouts face substantial economic and social challenges, while society bears the cost in lost productivity, reduced tax revenue, increased public assistance, and higher criminal justice expenditures.



This white paper makes the case for why re-engaging students ages 14-24 who have disappeared from our educational system without attaining a high school diploma – referred to as disengaged youth – through alternative education programs is a public good and a national imperative.

Drawing on data from national sources, recent research, and post-pandemic trends, the paper explores why students drop out, what works to bring them back, and what economic and social returns are possible when we succeed.

It concludes with recommendations for policymakers, education leaders, and community organizations seeking to expand re-engagement pathways and remove policy challenges that prevent young people from completing high school.

2

Dropout Rates and Student Characteristics



The nature of dropouts makes it hard to reliably track students who drop out.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) serves as the primary source for authoritative dropout data, using measures like the “status dropout rate” (the total percentage of students who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a diploma regardless of when they leave school) and the “event dropout rate” (the percentage of students who leave school in a given year).



NCES data confirms a downward trend in overall dropout rate, but details persistent gaps for certain student subgroups.

State education departments also track cohort graduation and dropout rates (e.g., via the Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate, or ACGR). It’s worth noting that definitions can vary: some states count only those who formally withdraw, while others include students who simply stop attending. Experts caution that dropout data often lag and may undercount certain students (for example, those who disappear from enrollment rolls). Thus, a combination of measures – cohort graduation rates, annual dropout counts, and status dropout estimates – gives the fullest picture.

The national graduation rate had been increasing and reached 86% in 2019 (the most recent year for which complete data is available at the time of writing), yet over 1.2 million students drop out annually, equating to approximately one dropout every 26 seconds.



2.1

Dropout Rates and Student Characteristics

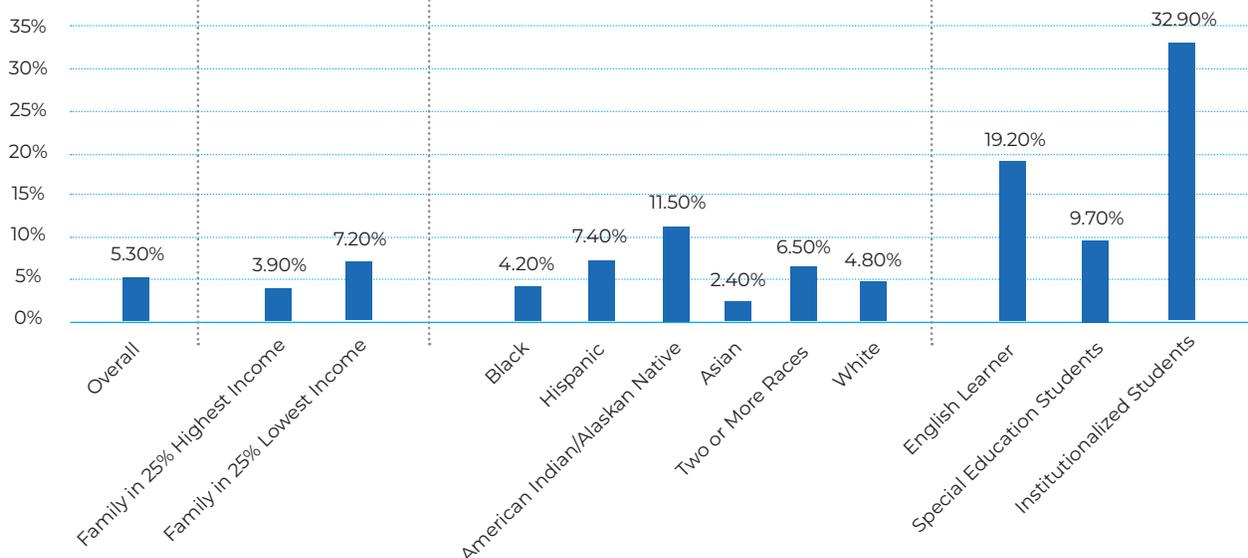
Dropout Rates by Student Groups

The “status dropout rate” has improved from 7% in 2012 to 5.3% in 2022, but progress has plateaued (NCES, 2024).

STATUS DROPOUT RATE (%)



High school dropout rates in the United States vary significantly among different student subgroups, particularly affecting students from low-income families, special education students, and English learners (ELs). Dropout rates disproportionately affect low-income, Black, Hispanic, and Native American students, as well as special education students and English learners.



2.1

Dropout Rates and Student Characteristics

Dropout Rates by Student Groups

Students from Low-Income Families

Family income is a strong predictor of dropout rates. In 2016, the event dropout rate for 15- to 24-year-olds from families in the lowest income quarter was 7.2%, higher than the rates for those from families in the middle high (3.6%) and highest income quarters (3.9%) (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023).

Special Education Students

Special education students face unique challenges that contribute to higher dropout rates, especially as they get to the latter years of their high school experience, where services and supports may need to be more tailored to meet their needs. In 2016, the most recent year for which NCES data was available for this group, the event dropout rate for 15- to 24-year-olds in this subgroup was 6.7%, compared to 4.7% for their peers not in this group (NCES, 2024).

English Learners (ELs)

ELs often encounter additional obstacles in the education system, leading to higher dropout rates. Factors such as language challenges and cultural differences contribute to this trend. While specific national dropout rates for ELs are not provided in the available data, data is provided on students whose primary language at home includes something other than English, and it is well-documented that ELs have disproportionately high dropout rates and low graduation rates (NCES, 2024).

Institutionalized Students and Students in Juvenile Justice

Institutionalized students are those residing in institutional group quarters, such as correctional facilities, nursing homes, or mental hospitals. These students often have limited opportunities to engage in education and have a dropout rate (32.9%) more than 6 times higher than students not in these settings (NCES, 2024).

2.2

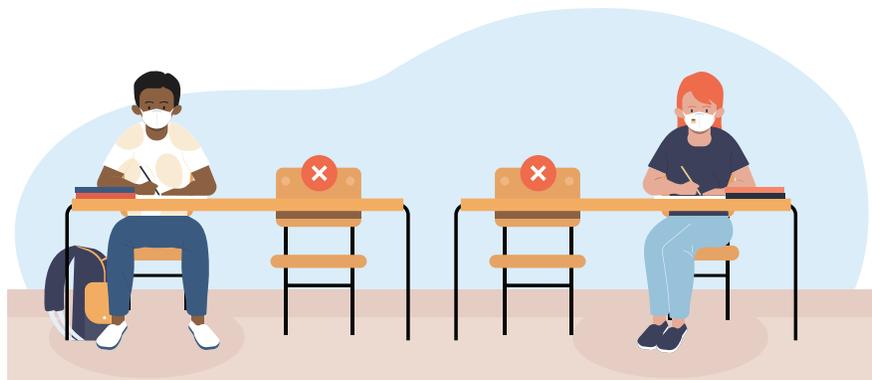
Dropout Rates and Student Characteristics

Post-2019 Trends and the Impact of COVID-19

Post-2019 Trends and the Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing challenges and disrupted progress:

- **National Graduation Rates Declined:** After a decade of consistent growth, the national high school graduation rate declined in 2020, though it appears to be rebounding in recent years (Irwin et.al, 2024).
- **State Variations Expanded:** In 2020, ten states had graduation rates above 90%, but by 2022, this number dropped to five, reflecting post-COVID declines (Graduation Success Partnership, 2024).
- **Chronic Absenteeism Surged:** Nationwide rates of absenteeism rose sharply during the pandemic and have not returned to pre-COVID levels. In many large districts, the problem has become entrenched. In New York City, for example, more than 300,000 public school students—nearly 35%—were chronically absent in the 2023–24 school year, compared with 26.5% before the pandemic (NY Post, 2023). This sustained rise is especially concerning because chronic absenteeism is one of the strongest early indicators of later dropout and long-term disengagement from school.
- **Missing Students:** Large districts reported thousands of students who never logged on to remote learning or who disappeared shortly into remote learning experiences (Shen-Berro, 2023).



2.2

Dropout Rates and Student Characteristics

Post-2019 Trends and the Impact of COVID-19

These disruptions were especially hard on students already on the cusp of leaving school. For some, economic hardship in the family increased – teenagers took on jobs as parents lost employment or had to watch younger siblings when schools and daycares closed.

By fall 2020, school districts across the country reported thousands of “missing” students who never showed up online. Not all of these became official dropouts (some districts worked hard to locate and re-enroll them), but these disruptions translated into delayed graduations and higher dropout numbers in many places. For example, North Carolina reported 17% more dropouts in 2021 than pre-pandemic levels, and large districts like Chicago, Los Angeles, and others saw spikes in chronic absenteeism that foreshadow future dropouts.

In short, COVID-19 amplified classic dropout factors (like disengagement and life pressures) and added new ones. Loss of school-community connection, greater academic gaps, and widespread emotional stress have shifted the landscape, making post-pandemic dropout prevention an urgent priority. Educators are now not only re-focusing on the age-old reasons students quit school but also addressing the disruption of the past few years.



3

Why Students Drop Out

Most dropouts do not leave school due to academic failure alone.



Key reasons include:

- Lack of engagement and relevance in coursework (Civic Enterprises, 2006).
- Weak relationships with teachers or peers (Gewertz, 2006).
- Family responsibilities, economic pressures, or housing instability.
- Mental health challenges exacerbated by the pandemic.



Surveys show that many students believe they could have graduated if their schools had offered more personalized support, flexibility, and encouragement (Graduation Success Partnership, 2024).

Lack of Engagement

Large surveys and interviews with former students have revealed some common themes. In a landmark survey of high school dropouts, nearly half said they left because classes were “uninteresting” or they didn’t see the relevance, and 69% reported that they weren’t motivated to work hard (Civic Enterprises, 2006). Many felt a weak connection to their school – they didn’t have strong relationships with teachers or peers that would keep them invested.

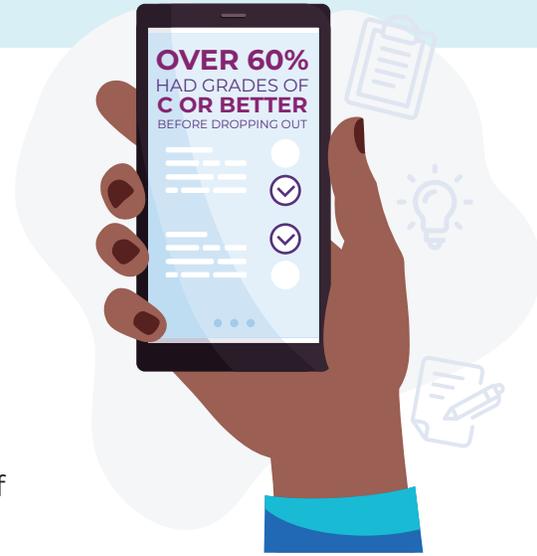
Academic History

Likewise, a student’s academic history can signal likely disengagement: those who have been held back a grade, have very low GPAs, or who are older than typical for their grade are much more likely to give up on school. However, this does not indicate that these students are not capable.

3

Why Students Drop Out

Only about one-third of students cited failing academically as a major factor, and in fact, **over 60% had grades of C or better before dropping out.** Many dropouts were disengaged long before they formally left – chronic absenteeism, disciplinary issues, and feelings of alienation in school are common red flags (Graduation Success Partnership, 2024). This suggests that boredom, lack of challenge, or a feeling of not belonging can push out even students who are capable of passing their classes.



Mental Health

In surveys and interviews since COVID, students commonly mention mental health struggles, anxiety, and depression as challenges to staying in school. Isolation during school closures and the stress of the pandemic took a toll on student well-being. Even after returning to classrooms, many students felt disconnected or far behind academically, which can be demoralizing.

Administrators note that some students never fully came back – even if they re-enrolled, they attended sporadically or lacked engagement.

In urban districts like Albuquerque, NM, the pandemic's effect was clearly reflected in outcomes: Albuquerque Public Schools saw its graduation rate drop from 75% for the Class of 2021 to just 69% for the Class of 2022, a decline officials attribute to the difficulties students had during remote learning and the credit gaps that resulted (Schacht, 2023).

3

Why Students Drop Out

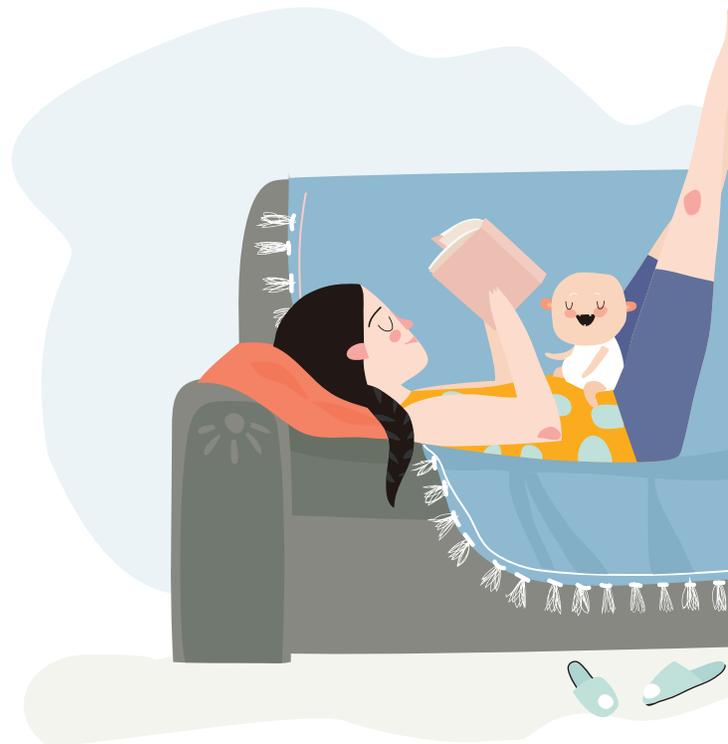
External Factors

Equally significant are factors outside of school. A student might initially start missing school due to a crisis or responsibility at home, fall behind in credits, and then feel it's impossible to catch up.

Teen pregnancy has been a significant reason for students to drop out; though rates have declined, young parents still often struggle to continue school without strong support.

Frequent school transfers or mobility (such as when a family moves often) can also increase dropout likelihood, as students lose credits or connections and become discouraged.

In short, any situation that causes a student to feel disconnected – whether boredom in class or life outside of school – can set the stage for dropping out.



4

The Role and Impact of Alternative Education

Alternative education programs—including re-engagement centers, credit recovery programs, online academies, and GED pathways—offer customized, student-centered approaches.

While these programs often report lower four-year graduation rates, they serve students who are deeply off-track and unlikely to graduate otherwise. A closer look shows that many alternative programs are making a meaningful difference in helping disengaged youth get back on track.

Graduation Rates

Students entering alternative programs have typically fallen far behind academically, and often need extra time or non-traditional pathways to earn a diploma. As a result, states are increasingly tracking extended graduation rates (5-year, 6-year, or even 7-year graduation rates) to capture the successes of alternative schools.

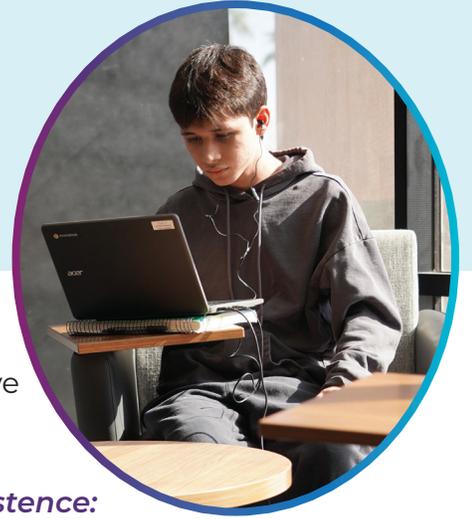
For example, in Colorado, officials reported that the four-year graduation rate at the state’s alternative high schools was only 39%, but the seven-year graduation rate (allowing more time for credit-deficient students) rose to 52% (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2020).



This highlights that many students who “drop out” of a traditional high school do eventually earn a credential when given time and support in an alternative setting. Nationwide data reflect the challenge schools must face to get disengaged students to graduation: nearly 68% of alternative high schools had official 4-year graduation rates below 60% (versus only 6% of regular high schools below that threshold) (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2020).

4

The Role and Impact of Alternative Education



Retention Rates

While on the surface this seems low, it is largely because alternative schools start with students who were unlikely to graduate at all.

The more important metrics are re-engagement and persistence: what portion of those who enter an alternative program end up staying in school and completing a diploma or GED?

On this front, there is encouraging evidence. Post-Covid data is still hard to come by for this population as the landscape continues to rapidly shift, however, a pre-Covid survey by the National League of Cities Reengagement Network (covering 20 cities) found that in a single year re-engagement programs collectively helped 11,737 previously disconnected students earn a high school diploma or equivalent (Joesbury & Guzman, 2018).

Across these programs, about 69.8% of youth who re-enrolled were still enrolled or had completed a credential by the end of the year – **a nearly 70% “stick rate” for a population that was, by definition, on the verge of being lost.** These figures demonstrate that with targeted interventions, the majority of dropouts can indeed be recovered and set on a path to completion.

This begs the question: What would happen to these students if the alternative option did not exist?

The evidence suggests many would simply drop out and never return. In that sense, alternative education can be seen as highly effective – it’s capturing students that the traditional system failed to engage in a meaningful way - based on their personal circumstances. Many states have recognized this and adjusted accountability systems accordingly, so that alternative schools are evaluated using more appropriate measures (such as credit attainment, extended-year graduation, or successful transitions to jobs/college) rather than the standard four-year graduation rate (GAO, 2020).

Ultimately, alternative education programs are critical dropout safety nets. When well-implemented, they demonstrate the ability to retain and graduate a large share of students who would otherwise be statistical dropouts. The payoff is not only seen in individual lives turned around, but in the broader social benefits discussed next.

5

Social and Economic Impact of Re-Engaging Students

When a young person earns a high school diploma instead of dropping out, the benefits ripple outward—to the individual, the community, and the economy.



Conversely, high school dropouts as a group impose significant costs on society. Re-engaging students and guiding them to graduation yields substantial public savings and increased revenues, while also improving quality of life and civic outcomes.

High school graduates earn significantly higher incomes than those who drop out. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023), individuals aged 25 and over without a high school diploma earned median weekly wages of \$713, compared to \$889 for those with a high school diploma. This equates to an annual income difference of \$9,152, or approximately \$366,000 over a 40-year career (BLS, 2023). The Alliance for Excellent Education (2011) estimates the lifetime earnings gap to be as high as \$381,000, depending on employment sector and geography. According to their report, increasing the national high school graduation rate to 90 percent would result in an additional \$7.2 billion in annual earnings.

If we consider a whole cohort, one study projected that if all the dropouts from the Class of 2011 had instead graduated, it would have added \$154 billion in collective lifetime income to the U.S. economy (Lynch, 2013). That is one cohort's impact; year after year, similar losses accrue if dropout rates remain high. Every student we can steer to graduation contributes to a stronger tax base.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that as of October 2023, among 16- to 24-year-olds, 43.7 percent of recent high school dropouts were working or looking for work, much lower than the labor force participation rate of 71.7 percent for recent high school graduates not enrolled in college (BLS, 2024). Overall, graduates are more likely to gain stable employment (the unemployment rate for dropouts is consistently higher – in October 2023, it was nearly 24%, about double the rate for recent high school grads) and less likely to need government assistance. Even modest increases in graduation rates can produce large economic returns.

5

Social and Economic Impact of Re-Engaging Students

The societal benefits extend beyond earnings.

When a young person earns a high school diploma instead of dropping out, the benefits ripple outward—to the individual, the community, and the economy. Conversely, high school dropouts as a group impose significant costs on society.

Re-engaging students and guiding them to graduation yields substantial public savings and increased revenues, while also improving quality of life and civic outcomes.

Analyses of the lifetime public costs associated with educational attainment estimate that each additional high school graduate reduces taxpayer expenditures by roughly \$60,000–\$70,000, primarily through lower public assistance, health care, and criminal justice costs, even before accounting for increased tax contributions (Belfield & Levin, 2007).

Northeastern University labor economists estimate the net lifetime cost of a high school dropout to taxpayers at approximately \$292,000, factoring in lower earnings, higher unemployment, and incarceration costs.

Roughly half of all Americans on public assistance are dropouts indicating that educational failure often precedes economic hardship that requires government aid. In terms of health costs, dropouts have worse health outcomes on average and may draw more from public health programs.

Put another way, a dropout contributes significantly less in taxes and consumes more in social services than an average high school graduate.



ECONOMIC RETURN ON RE-ENGAGEMENT

\$65,000

Immediate public savings per re-engaged graduate

\$292,000

Net taxpayer cost of a dropout

\$366,000+

Lifetime earnings difference

5

Social and Economic Impact of Re-Engaging Students



Beyond direct dollars, there are numerous social advantages to re-engaging dropouts.

High school graduates are more likely to be employed and in higher-skilled jobs, helping meet workforce needs in the community. In an era when many industries struggle to find qualified entry-level workers, turning dropouts into graduates (and ideally into college or vocational training students) expands the talent pool.

Graduates also have better health outcomes and longer life expectancies (about 4 years), which reduces strain on healthcare systems (GBD, 2025). There is also a civic dimension: high school graduates are more likely to vote and participate in civic life than dropouts (Kim, 2023), and their greater social stability can contribute to more stable communities.



Perhaps most importantly, breaking the dropout cycle can impact the next generation. Children of high school graduates are themselves more likely to graduate, whereas children of individuals who dropped out are more likely to perpetuate a cycle of limited opportunities (Ingles et al, 2002). By re-engaging a young person today, we may be preventing his or her younger siblings or future children from following the same path.

Finally, reducing dropouts can help lower crime rates and enhance public safety. While the relationship is complex, communities that have successfully re-engaged large numbers of youth often see positive side effects like reduced juvenile crime. Dropouts are overrepresented in both welfare rolls and prison populations—estimates show that 70-80% of U.S. prisoners lack a high school diploma, and roughly half of public assistance recipients are dropouts (BJS, 2003; Lynch, 2013).

5

Social and Economic Impact of Re-Engaging Students



These figures underscore the broader costs of educational disengagement. Improving educational attainment is a long-term strategy for crime prevention. This reflects a broad consensus: investing on the front end (in education re-engagement) is far cheaper and more community-focused than paying the consequences of dropout later.

By spending a few thousand dollars per student on alternative education pathways now, states can potentially save hundreds of thousands per student in the future.

Outcomes of High School Completion vs. Dropping Out

Outcome Area	High School Completers	Dropouts	Source
Lifetime Earnings	~\$1.6 Million	~\$1.3 Million	Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023
Unemployment Rate	6%	12%	NCES, 2023
Health	Twice as likely to report good/excellent health	Higher rates of chronic illness and early mortality	CDC, 2022
Civic Participation	62% Voter participation in recent national elections	32% Voter participation	U.S. Census Bureau, 2020
Public Cost Impact	+\$200K-\$250K Lifetime tax contribution	Higher reliance on social services and corrections	Alliance for Excellent Education, 2017

6

Conclusion & Recommendations

Re-engaging high school dropouts is one of the most cost-effective and civic-minded strategies we can pursue as a nation.

It benefits individuals, strengthens communities, and yields long-term economic and civic returns. With the right policies, programs, and partnerships, we can bring more students back to the path of opportunity and ensure that every young person has a real chance to graduate.



Recommendations for Policy and Practice

1. Look Beyond the Four-Year Clock

- Track 5 through 8-year graduation and completion rates, as well as GED attainment, to capture the real successes of re-engagement programs.

2. Prioritize Whole-Child Support

- Fund counseling, mentoring, and life-coaching services that help students overcome challenges like housing instability, mental health challenges, or caregiving responsibilities.

3. Stabilize Funding for Re-Engagement Programs

- Create sustainable state and local funding streams, rather than relying on short-term or discretionary dollars.

4. Expand Credit Recovery and Competency-Based Learning

- Support approaches that allow students to progress at their own pace while ensuring rigor and alignment to graduation standards.

5. Encourage District-Provider Partnerships

- Enable districts to collaborate with specialized re-engagement providers like Acceleration Academies to extend reach and expertise.

6. Focus on Students with the Greatest Challenges

- Direct resources and supports to young people who are most likely to drop out—those from low-income households, English learners, special education students, and students affected by life circumstances or juvenile justice involvement.

7

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7

Additional Resources

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*Verified and active as of January 9, 2026.



**We partner with
school districts
to accelerate
student progress
and enable lasting
change**

**Comprehensive
Student
Support**

Intensive Personalized Support

Our educators provide comprehensive supports to remove challenges that have caused students to struggle in a traditional setting.

**Dropout
Re-engagement**

Vigorous Recruitment Strategies

We actively seek to re-engage students on the cusp of leaving school and those who have abandoned education; we don't wait for them to come to us.

**Proprietary
Platform**

Technology to Retain and Graduate

We use myIncite, a state-of-the-art technology platform, to support teaching and learning in our academies.

**Flexible
Scheduling**

Work Around Student Schedules

Tailored commitment plans that work for individual student schedules whether they are working to support their families or just need another option.

**Post-Graduation
Pathways**

Career and Technical Education

Career coaches work with students to map out pathways to higher education, financial aid, internships and career opportunities.

*Our partners return to us year after year because
of our strong student outcomes.*