

1

What This Book Is About

TOPICS

- Importance of Raising Graduation Rates
- Implications of Current Reform Context
- Critical Need for Knowing and Doing
- Overview of This Book

Never before has it seemed so important to our country that all students graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills to meet the demands of the workplace and of society as a whole. A diploma is the most commonly accepted document indicating successful completion of high school. The press for an educated citizenry is the result of many factors, driven in large part by economic factors. But, it is not just the importance of graduation rates to our country that has pushed us to write this book. It is the importance of graduation to the youth of our country in the early 21st century who find too many doors closed to them—regardless of their knowledge or skills—when they do not have that simple piece of paper: the high school diploma.

In this chapter, we provide a brief overview of the importance of raising graduation rates and the cost of students dropping out of school. We also highlight the implications of the current education reform context, and specifically the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, for graduation rate calculations. Finally, we talk turkey—what is the purpose of this book? How have we organized it to make it most useful for you as you use it?

One of the techniques that we use in our chapters throughout the book to help focus your reading is to identify topic-specific myths and truths. Test your knowledge now, then check yourself when you finish reading the chapter. The Myth or Truth? statements appear in boxes at the beginning of each chapter; for Chapter 1 they are presented in Box 1.1. The answers appear in a similar box at the end of the chapter.

2 GRADUATION FOR ALL

Box 1.1 Myth or Truth? Do You Know?

Read each statement following and decide whether it is a myth or the truth.

1. Most states met the goal of a 90% school completion rate in the year 2000.
2. Those who drop out of school are more likely to be unemployed.
3. Dropouts tend to create significant costs to society.
4. The No Child Left Behind Act requires graduation exams.
5. The percentage of students graduating from high school is an adequate yearly progress accountability indicator.

IMPORTANCE OF RAISING GRADUATION RATES

High school graduation rates have grown dramatically from the early 1900s, when 96% of all individuals 18 years and older had not completed high school. By the 1960s, the noncompletion rate was only about one-fourth of this population, and today it is closer to 14% of all youth. That is a lot of improvement! So, why are we concerned about raising graduation rates?

There are three main reasons that we are concerned and need to be concerned about raising graduation rates and decreasing school dropouts: (1) extensiveness of the issue, (2) costs to the individual, and (3) costs to society. We discuss each of these briefly here. In Chapter 3, we devote a little more attention to the numbers and what they mean in general and for your own context.

Extensiveness of the Issue

School dropouts are easily hidden in statistics, even when they are a huge issue. We have used the term *extensive* here because we believe that the school dropout issue is extensive, even though it is not necessarily always evident how extensive it is.

In 2002, the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that hundreds of thousands of students in the United States leave school early each year without successfully completing school. A study by Jay Greene and others at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, highlighting variability in graduation rates across states, indicated that the percentage of eighth grade students who graduate five years later ranged from a low of 55% in Florida to a high of 87% in New Jersey.

There are many factors that come into play in these types of numbers. And, there are many other numbers that need to be investigated, including what the graduation and dropout rates look like for different subgroups of students, and whether the rates are influenced when certain types of exit documents (certificates of attendance, General Educational Development—GED—diplomas, or Individualized Educational Program—IEP—diplomas) are not counted in graduation rates. For now, suffice it to say that there is a fair amount of evidence—and more that we look at in Chapter 3—to indicate that we have a problem that needs

to be addressed. This book is designed to address it where we can do that best: at the district and school levels.

Costs to the Individual

Dropping out of school rarely is a good thing, especially in today's world. There are few employers willing even to consider hiring a person who does not have a high school diploma. Research has confirmed that those who drop out of school are more likely to be unemployed, or to have jobs that do not use the skills that they do have. School dropouts are found among the populations in jails and prisons more often than are those who graduated from high school.

All of these indicators are what the research calls costs to the individual. They are ways in which the individual "pays" for not having obtained the high school diploma. It is the rare individual who manages to get beyond the baggage of not having a high school diploma to end up in a successful and well-paying job. The one or two individuals who have done this are legends—the material of Hollywood films. It is a dangerous fallacy to believe that many individuals can pull themselves up from not having a high school diploma to become thriving and successful adults, especially in today's economic realities.

Costs to Society

While we can all understand costs to the individual and how significant they are, it is *costs to society* that drive the need for federal and state programs to raise graduation rates and decrease school dropouts. What do we mean by costs to society? Consider what happens when students graduate from high school. Most either obtain jobs or go on for additional education or training. These students are almost guaranteed higher paying jobs than those students who have dropped out of school.

Unless economic times are very good, and jobs are very plentiful, students who have dropped out of school tend to have a very difficult time finding jobs, and are more likely to end up needing assistance from governmental agencies. They are less likely to pay taxes, and even if they pay taxes, they are likely to pay much less than they would have had they completed high school and obtained higher paying jobs. School dropouts are not giving to society what they could have, and therefore, they are costing society.

U.S. Census Bureau educational attainment by earnings figures for 2002 indicate that students who receive a high school diploma or GED diploma earn on average about \$29,200, while those who exit school between Grades 9 and 12 without a diploma earn on average about \$22,500. These figures, of course, change with the economic times. Researcher Jay Greene reported just a few years earlier that the 1999 Current Population Survey of the U.S. Census showed that those who earned a high school diploma or GED earned \$29,294 compared to \$15,334 for those without these diplomas. In a report titled *The Big Payoff*, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that workers who were high school graduates earned about \$270,000 more over their work lives than high school dropouts. These differences have significant implications for the tax dollars used for public services and societal benefits.

Our society depends on certain things to keep it running successfully. It depends on the collection of sufficient taxes and the minimal use of funds to support people who are not working or who have committed crimes. Youth who do not graduate from school and youth who drop out of school tend to create significant costs to

4 GRADUATION FOR ALL

society in the form of lost tax revenues, increased welfare and unemployment costs, and increased prosecution and incarceration costs. The specific costs that are created by dropouts are difficult to estimate because they do vary with the economic times. But clearly, the costs are too high.

IMPLICATIONS OF CURRENT REFORM CONTEXT

The current context of reform has been bubbling for years. It probably started most recently in 1983 when *A Nation at Risk* was published, declaring that the American education had lost its edge—once gained back after the Sputnik scare in the 1950s. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education found that the U.S. educational system was severely lacking in rigor, and that students who left school with diplomas did not have the skills that students in other nations had. States and districts reacted by increasing course and credit requirements, with apparently little effect on international test results. Then, all of the states' governors met in a national summit in 1989. At this summit, they identified a set of national education goals that became the basis for a law known as Goals 2000. One of the primary goals was that the high school graduation rate would be 90% by the year 2000.

Despite all this attention, including yearly reports that marked each state's progress and the nation's progress toward meeting each of the national education goals, only 17 states had achieved the 90% school completion rate by the year 2000. Note that slight change in wording from "graduation rate" to "completion rate." When the National Education Goals Panel defined the measures for Goal 2, "graduation rate" was changed to "school completion rate," so that graduation with an IEP diploma and a GED diploma were counted along with standard high school diplomas.

At the same time as Goals 2000 existed, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1994 (called the Improving America's Schools Act) emphasized the importance of clear and rigorous content standards for all students. There was no mention of graduation standards in this law, but there was a firm and consistent message that all students should be held to high and rigorous standards, and that state assessments were to be the measure of the success of school programs in ensuring that all students reached high academic standards.

When Goals 2000 ended in the year 2000, with disappointing results on nearly all goals, and it was also time for the reauthorization of ESEA, the concern about graduation rates was reignited. Thus, when ESEA was reauthorized in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act, graduation rate became the "additional" accountability indicator (in addition to assessment results) at the high school level. When this happened, the interest in increasing graduation rates escalated considerably. In many states, NCLB added to already existing high-stakes tests that determined whether students earned standard diplomas.

No Child Left Behind Defined "Standard" Diploma

NCLB requires that schools and districts include the percentage of students graduating from high school as an accountability indicator at the high school level, contributing to the determination of whether adequate yearly progress was achieved. In other words, each year, the graduation rate had to increase steadily, reaching a "proficient" level by 2014.

How *graduation rate* is actually defined now becomes very important. Language in the law clearly indicates that the graduation rate includes only those students earning standard diplomas within four years of their ninth grade year in school, not those earning alternative graduation certificates such as GEDs. Any variation from this definition has to be explained in state accountability plans.

Narrow definitions of what constitutes “graduation” create several challenges for some subgroups of students, particularly students with disabilities and English language learners. We examine the definitional issues as we explore in a little more depth what we know about the dropout problem and its statistics in Chapter 3.

State High-Stakes Testing

NCLB and other federal legislation say nothing about requiring students to pass tests to earn a high school diploma. Instead, governors and state legislators in more than 25 states now have enacted laws that require students to pass tests to receive a standard diploma. In some states, a single test that covers a wide range of content must be passed, while in other states, tests in multiple content areas must be passed. More recently, states have begun to implement end-of-course testing as a graduation requirement, with certain courses and the passing of their tests required for the receipt of a standard diploma. In some states, there are alternative routes to earning the standard diploma that are available to some or all students in the state. What seems like it should be a very simple procedure—testing students to see whether they earn diplomas—is actually very complicated.

CRITICAL NEED FOR KNOWING AND DOING

As we developed this book, we realized that as readers, you need two critical things. First, you need to know certain things. Some of this is basic information, and some of it is scientifically based evidence about what works to address the dropout problem. Second, you need to know what to do—what actions to take—to prevent dropouts within the circle of your influence. We have attempted to meet both of these needs—the knowing needs and the doing needs—through the content and design of this book.

We have included strategies and approaches to the dropout problem that are based on research and scientific evidence. We try to make these as transparent as possible. We do not bog you down in the details of the research and scientific evidence, but try to give you pathways to them so that if you want to go there you can.

We have also included actions you can take. We have provided some things to do that help you make your way through the book—to help you process the content of the book, such as the Myth or Truth? boxes. And, we have provided some tools that help you dig into the context of the dropout problem in your school or your community. More on these “doing activities” is provided in the next section of the chapter.

OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

We know that you are busy, and that if you are reading this book it is because you are concerned about a real and important issue that face youth and schools today. School dropout is not a simple problem with a simple solution. It requires a multifaceted

6 GRADUATION FOR ALL

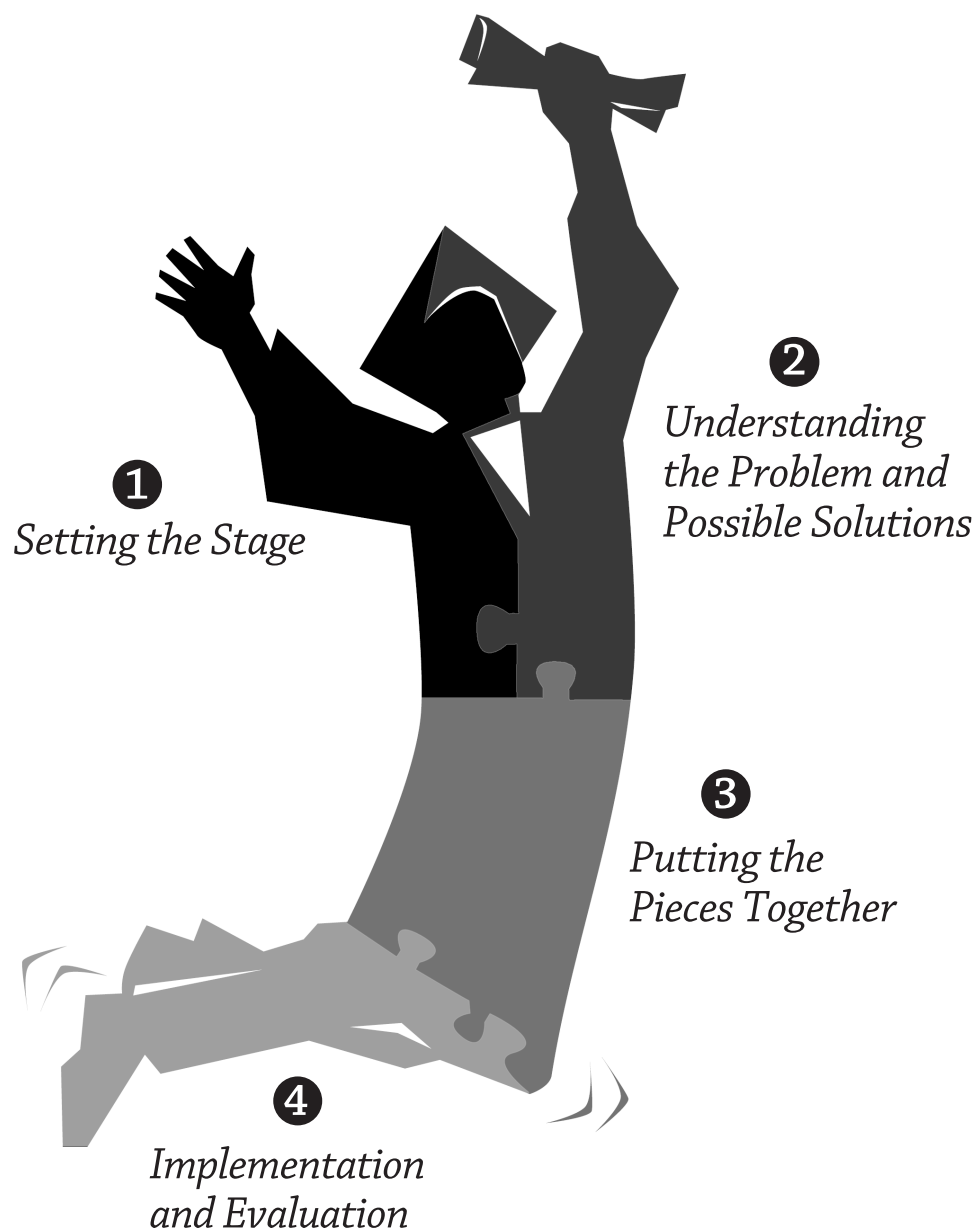


Figure 1.1 Organization of Book

approach that addresses multiple challenges. But school dropout is an issue that can be addressed and systematically attacked so that we dramatically decrease school dropouts and move toward graduation for all. To help this book get you there, we have organized it into four sections. These sections are described here and portrayed in Figure 1.1.

Section 1: Setting the Stage. Chapters 1 and 2 make the case for the need to address the dropout problem and lay out the basics on how to get your dropout prevention planning process started.

Section 2: Understanding the Problem and Possible Solutions. Chapters 3 through 5 address the challenges associated with getting accurate dropout statistics and examine the reasons for, process of, and factors associated with dropping out.

Section 3: Putting the Pieces Together. Chapters 6 through 8 contain guidance on how to analyze existing programs and services, identify the needs of your district or school, and select a course of action designed to meet those needs.

Section 4: Implementation and Evaluation. Chapters 9 and 10 lead you through the process of how to implement your action plan and gather information to determine how effective it is in preventing students from dropping out of your school.

In addition, the book ends with three appendices that provide information useful while reading the book and information useful in the future.

Appendix A: Directory of Action Tools. List of all tools included in each chapter of the book.

Appendix B: Glossary. Terms used in the book, with brief definitions.

Appendix C: Related Links. List of organizations and Web sites with useful information on topics relevant to increasing school completion and decreasing dropout.

Chapter Format

The chapters in this book follow the same basic format. They start with a list of the main points covered in the chapter (Topics) followed by statements describing what you learn and do when you go through the chapter (In This Chapter You Will . . .). A Myth or Truth? box, which contains true and false statements that you can identify at the beginning of a chapter, provides an advanced organizer for the chapter, which is then revisited at the end of the chapter, where answers are provided as a check of your understanding.

An Implementation Scenario that is directly linked with chapter content is provided in chapters 2 through 10. The scenario illustrates an example of how the process of addressing dropout might unfold in a district or school setting. Each chapter includes a brief synopsis of the chapter's important points (Summary), followed by a set of Reflection Questions. These are designed to initiate discussion and broad thinking related to the chapter topic—to ensure that the knowledge that you have gained gets thought about several times and in different ways. After the Reflection Questions, each chapter has a list of books, articles, and other documents that are either referenced in the chapter or that provide further information (Further Reading).

Within the chapters you will find not only the information that gives you the knowledge that you need, but also the tools that you need to do something with the knowledge that you have gained. A section of planning and process activities is provided for those of you ready to begin gathering data, organizing, and problem solving issues that are directly related to addressing the problem of dropout in your own setting—this final section is called “Taking Action.” The activities in this section are designed for individuals working on their own or in teams. Perhaps most important, each chapter provides a set of Action Tools, which includes forms, worksheets,

8 GRADUATION FOR ALL

Table 1.1 Organization of Chapters

<i>Topics</i>	List of the main points covered in the chapter
<i>In This Chapter You Will . . .</i>	Statements describing what you will learn and do in the chapter
<i>Myth or Truth?</i>	Box with true and false statements that you can identify at the beginning of the chapter, and then can check with answers at the end of the chapter [Body of Chapter with lots on information on the chapter's topic, some of it highlighted in boxes and tables]
<i>Summary</i>	Brief synopsis of the chapter's important points
<i>Reflection Questions</i>	Questions to initiate discussion and broad thinking related to the chapter topic
<i>Further Reading</i>	List of books, articles, and other documents either referenced in the chapter or that provide further information of interest
<i>Taking Action</i>	Section of action activities, designated for individuals or teams, with <i>Action Tools</i> , which are forms, worksheets, or other documents to guide you through the use of the tools; a <i>Guide to Action Tools</i> is provided as an overview to all tools in a chapter's <i>Taking Action</i> section

or other documents to guide you through various steps in the process. These and the Guide to Action Tools are a part of the Taking Action sections.

Because your progress through this book will be smoother if you really understand how it is laid out, we have included in Table 1.1 the general outline of each chapter. Understanding this before you start reading the chapters will serve you well, because at any point in time you will know where you are, where you have been, and where you are going!

Other Features of the Book

Evidence-Based Practices. This book is based on evidence-based practices and research. The reliance on research and scientific evidence permeates everything that we present, and was a primary consideration of whether general information, an example, or an action tool would be included.

User-Friendly Approach. Accompanying our belief in the need for evidence-based practices is our belief in the need for the information to be accessible by all. Thus, in this book, we have not provided academic references throughout the chapters. We refer to studies by name of investigator, as appropriate, and provide the references in the section on Further Reading at the end of each chapter. If there are questions about citations or sources of information, readers can contact us directly (see e-mail addresses in the Preface). We believe that this is preferable to bogging the text of this book down with traditional academic citations. We want this book to truly be a useful and practical guide to decreasing school dropout and increasing graduation for all.

Tools of Application. This book is not just a summary of research-based practices. We wanted to bridge research and practice and put it all together in one place—in a

format accessible to all. We wanted readers to be able to go directly from knowledge acquisition to implementing that knowledge. The Action Tools at the end of each chapter provide this bridge.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter was to get you on your way. We talked briefly about the importance of raising graduation rates, even though they are much higher today than they were 50 years ago. We highlighted not only the extensiveness of the dropout problem, but also the high costs to the individual and to society. With No Child Left Behind giving some emphasis to graduation rates, and many states requiring students to pass high-stakes exams to earn standard diplomas, we have our work cut out for us to promote graduation for all.

That is the purpose of this book, and in this chapter we have provided an overview of how we hope to get there. We give you tools to use and lots of pathways to follow to decrease school dropouts and pursue graduation for all. All chapters have knowledge, reflection, and doing actions for you.

Now, check your knowledge of the Myth or Truth? statements from the beginning of the chapter (see Box 1.2 for answers). How did you do? Were you able to explain why a statement was a myth or the truth?

Box 1.2 Myth or Truth? Answers

1. **Myth.** Most states met the goal of a 90% school completion rate in the year 2000. *Explanation:* Only 17 states met the goal of a 90% school completion rate in the year 2000. This goal was one that was set for states in 1990, so it was after 10 years that only 17 states met the goal. (See page XX.)
2. **Truth.** Those who drop out of school are more likely to be unemployed. *Explanation:* Research has confirmed that those who drop out of school are more likely to be unemployed. If they have jobs, those who dropped out of school are more likely not to use the skills that they do have. A high proportion of school dropouts end up in jails or prison. (See page XX.)
3. **Truth.** Dropouts tend to create significant costs to society. *Explanation:* Costs to society created by dropouts include lost tax revenues, increased welfare and unemployment costs, and increased prosecution and incarceration costs. (See page XX.)
4. **Myth.** The No Child Left Behind Act requires graduation exams. *Explanation:* The No Child Left Behind Act does not require that states administer an exam to determine whether students earn a standard diploma. It does require that the percentage of students graduating from high school be one indicator in the determination of adequate yearly progress. (See page XX.)
5. **Truth.** The percentage of students graduating from high school is an adequate yearly progress accountability indicator. *Explanation:* The No Child Left Behind Act requires that the percentage of students graduating from high school in four years with a standard diploma be an indicator in determining adequate yearly progress at the high school level. (See page XX.)

FURTHER READING

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