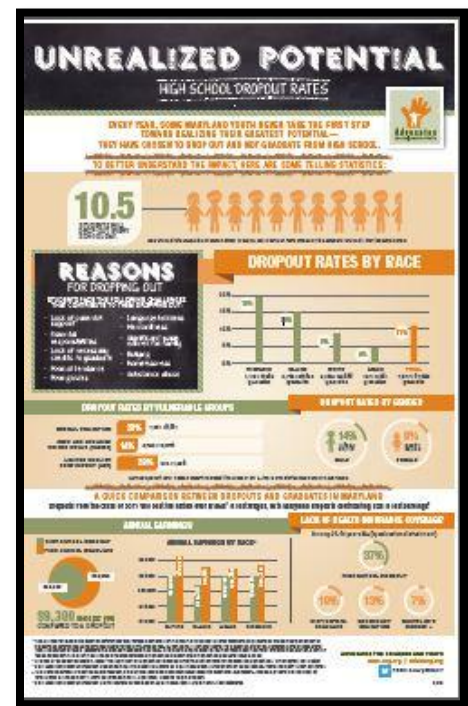# ACY Launches Initiative to Help More Students Graduate

The numbers are shocking. Every school day 10.5 students in Maryland will drop out of high school.   This statistic was enough to bring together state and local officials, school administrators, teachers, students, parents, researchers and support service providers for a discussion on how to decrease the dropout rate.

Graduate Maryland, Advocates for Children and Youth's initiative to increase graduation rates, was launched recently with a kick-off event.   The initiative was developed in response to Maryland's dropout rates and the recent passage of the new Compulsory School Age (CSA) law which increased the age for mandatory attendance from 16 to 18 years old.

"The passage of the CSA law is one milestone among many in preparing youth for college or a career," said David Beard, Advocates for Children and Youth's education policy director. "Our focus will now be on identifying key areas that affect a student's ability to receive high school certification whether through graduating or completing requirements in a General Education Development (GED) program."

Beard said it was important to convene stakeholders to begin the discussion by understanding the social, legislative and regulatory framework as it relates to education. In addition, stakeholders need information on Maryland's dropout statistics, the requirements for employment and the current situation in the Maryland educational system. This information, Beard said, would be instrumental in helping develop recommendations.

A High School Diploma in the 21st Century

Senator Catherine Pugh, a speaker at the event and a champion of the Compulsory School Age law, stressed the importance of graduation.   Years ago, when students were allowed to leave school at 16 years old they went to work on the farm or at Bethlehem Steel… those days are gone as technology has moved us a long way," Senator Pugh said. Many minimum wage jobs have moved overseas. Finding a job that will pay enough to support an individual or a family requires many more skills and competencies. "Receiving a high school diploma is the least that [a youth] can do" to be competitive Senator Pugh continued.

Trends and Early Warning Signs

Dr. Robert Balfanz, a research professor at Johns Hopkins University School of Education, agreed with Senator Pugh, stating that there is no work in the 21st century to support a family without a high school diploma. Balfanz, who co-directs Talent Development Secondary and the Everyone Graduates Center, is concerned about the cumulative effect. On average, there are 10,000 students who drop out and do not graduate. Over the course of 8 years—if the trend continues—there will be 80,000 people without much earning potential and an extremely challenging future.

However, Balfanz stated there is hope as early indicators show when children are in trouble. "Kids are signaling as early as 6th grade by their attendance and academic performance whether they will graduate or not," said Balfanz. The key is to get the appropriate help to children at the right time.

The Discussion Begins: Getting Appropriate Help to Children

Participants attended one of four breakout sessions to make recommendations on providing assistance to students. The following topics were addressed in the breakout sessions:

Early Interventions – High quality pre-kindergarten, elementary and middle school interventions and early warning systems can be effective ways of preventing the need for dropout prevention programs.

Alternative Programs and Funding Models – Innovative in-school alternative education models as well as partnerships with community programs will be crucial to decreasing dropout rates and increasing student academic engagement.

General Education Development (GED) Process – Students can circumvent the raise in the compulsory school age law by passing the GED. However, there currently can be significant lag time for students between enrolling in the prep program, taking the test and receiving the results and many students are not receiving any educational services during this time.

Strong Support Services for Socio-Economic Challenges – Students who are on the verge of dropping out often have many non-academic challenges in their life. Strong support services and good referrals systems to community-based programs are essential to increase the likelihood of graduation.

In the breakout groups, everyone had a voice during a dynamic exchange of ideas, experiences and information. Participants made several observations and developed

potential goals. The result of these discussions will be shared on the ACY website in upcoming weeks.

Over the spring and summer, these breakout groups will become workgroups that will share and prioritize ideas that will be developed into recommendations by the fall. If you are interested in participating in a work group, please email David Beard at dbeard@acy.org.
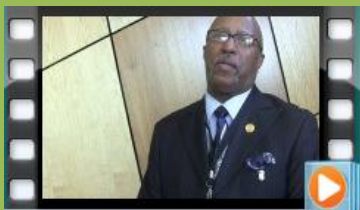
Helpful Resources

Compulsory School Age Law FAQs

Video Clips

Catherine Pugh, Maryland State Senator

Sonia Socha, Executive Director of South Baltimore Learning Center

Dr. Marvin Cheatham, Sr., Political Action Chair, Maryland State Conference of NAACP Branches