

Drop-Outs or Push-Outs: Students Vote With Their Feet

By Padres Unidos

“Now, when I say question the whole society, it means ultimately coming to see that the problem of racism, the problem of exploitation, and the problem of war are all tied together. These are the triple evils that are interrelated.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

SCLC Presidential Address, August 16, 1967

In more than 15 years of work with parents and students in Denver, Colorado, we’ve learned that the word “dropout” is absolutely the wrong word for the crisis in our schools. What is happening is a *push-out*, the end result of low-income students and students of color being systematically underserved by public schools.

The Problem in Denver

Denver Public Schools is one of the first majority-minority districts in Colorado – 57 percent of our students are Latino, 19 percent are Black, and 20 percent white. According to the district, the official dropout rate for Denver Public Schools is 4.6 percent; by race, Black students are at the district average, and Latinos have a dropout rate of 5.3 percent.¹

Our research, and the research of others, has shown these dropout figures to be misleading at best. The best way to see the impact of students of color being pushed out is to look at the number of youth walking out school doors with a diploma. Ignore the dropout rate – what’s the graduation rate?

Once again, if you rely on the district’s numbers, you’ll get a bad, but not horrible picture: a graduation rate of 77 percent for Black students and 72 percent for Latino students.² We had seen numbers similar to these for years, but they had never rung true nor matched what we saw every day in the schools and in our community.

In 2002-2003, Jovenes Unidos – the youth component of Padres Unidos – surveyed their peers at North High School, pored over enrollment and achievement data, and came to some shocking conclusions, one of which was that the district had inflated graduation rates by nearly 100 percent. When students took the number of students entering in ninth grade and the number of students leaving four years later, they found an average graduation rate of 38 percent for nearly every inner-city school of color in the district – meaning that nearly two-thirds of the youth who entered North High School left before graduation.

¹ Denver Public Schools Department of Planning, Assessment, and Research, *Report of Dropouts and Graduates 2003-2004*, July 2005.

² *Ibid.*

What is even more shocking is that we may have been overly generous: A 2004 report by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard and the Urban Institute found a 38.6 percent graduation rate for Black students and a 30.5 percent graduation rate for Latino students in DPS.³

How the Push-Out Works

The question is, of course, why? Why aren't students of color and low-income students in school and graduating? We believe there are two main reasons:

1) Students of color and low-income students are taught down to.

Classified as "at-risk," channeled into remedial classes from an early age, or held to lower standards, students of color and low-income students are consistently and systematically set up for academic failure.

Some of this is caused by the hard racism of administrators and teachers expecting students of color to be less intelligent, but the majority is caused by what we call the "pobrecita syndrome" (for those who don't speak Spanish, the "poor little thing syndrome"). That's when well-intentioned but completely misguided teachers and administrators give students of color and low-income students less challenging work because "they have so much going on outside of school," or "they face so many challenges," or their parents didn't complete their education or have to work three jobs, or any one of five hundred other reasons. A particularly potent version of this is the incorrect theory that youth who don't have access to early childhood programs are doomed to failure – predetermining that the majority of low-income students, white and of color, don't stand a chance from the get-go.

All of these ideas can be derived from the "Coleman Theory," which is taught to all college students seeking a degree in teaching, claiming that where students come from is more important than the school they attend. It is the ideological and institutional foundation for tracking low-income "at-risk" students into a dumbed-down curriculum and, in action, is inherently racist and oppressive.

Using a student's family, race, or class as an excuse to teach him or her less, or at a lower level, than other students is an injustice – whether it is well-intentioned or not. At North High School this year, 18 out of the 400 entering ninth-graders tested at grade level at math. Let us repeat that: 95 percent of the ninth grade students could not do math at grade level and are thus repeating middle school math in their freshman year at North.

This is not the result of students being stupid. This is not the result of students coming from "difficult" family backgrounds. This isn't because students are Latino or working

³ Orfield, *et al. Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis*. The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University & The Urban Institute, March 2004.

class or immigrants. **This is the result of educators not believing in the intellectual capacity of low-income students of color and poor people.**

2) Racial disparities in discipline.

Students of color and low-income students are targeted for more discipline, which dramatically increases the push-out rates. As we showed in several projects this past year, zero-tolerance discipline policies disproportionately affect youth of color. When students are suspended, expelled, or arrested at school, several things happen. They fall behind in their school work – and the frustration of not being able to catch up makes it far more likely they will drop out. They are pushed out of school and onto the streets, where racial profiling makes it far more likely they will get picked up again and, this time, will be in even deeper trouble.

Youth of color and low-income youth end up criminalized – behavior that would receive a stern talking-to in the suburbs results in a criminal record for inner-city youth. In Denver Public Schools, Latino students are seven times more likely than white students to receive a police ticket in school. Black students are five times more likely than white students to be expelled.

The Results:

This miseducation and criminalization of students of color and poor students pushes them out by forcing them to vote with their feet. Students know when they're being conned, and it's happening every day in their classrooms. Treated like either dull-witted pity cases or criminals, youth are fully capable of telling that the deck is stacked against them, and they get out while the getting is good. The frustration of going through the same classes again and again and learning nothing, the frustration of having to go to court for trespassing because you picked up your sister from another school – these frustrations are real, justified, and the basis of why so few students of color and low-income students make it to graduation. It's simply not worth it.

The Answer:

Districts try program after program to keep students in school – having officers knock on doors, offering incentives, contracts – and they don't work because they don't address the root problems. The “dropout” crisis won't be solved by keeping more students in classrooms where they are taught down to and disproportionately disciplined.

Fix the classroom and the students will follow. What is critical is a radical change in school culture and practice, rooted in the belief that *all* students – regardless of race, income, whether their parents went to college, or if they attended preschool – are capable of high-level academic work and that everyone should be prepared for college.

Ensure that all students are taught at a rigorous, college-prep level. Ensure that discipline is just and equitable. Ensure that all students graduate ready to succeed in college – so

that whether they go to college or not, it's *their* choice, not the school's. Ensure that the goal of discipline is to keep students in school and learning, not pushing "bad" students out. Ensure that students are challenged and engaged academically. Ensure that discipline, like everything else in school, is used to *teach*, and that students have a chance to learn before they're left on the sidewalk.

That's how you stop dropouts. And we better do it soon, because we're losing more students every day.