Report to the Legislature

Findings and Recommendations
of the Building Bridges State-Level Workgroup on
Dropout Prevention, Intervention, and Retrieval

Representative Pat Sullivan, Chair

December 2008

In the 2006–07 school year, 20,122 Washington students dropped out of school. These disconnected youth now face multiple barriers to becoming successful adults. They are far more likely than their peers to engage in substance abuse, inflict harm on others and themselves, suffer mental health problems, and live on our streets. They are also more likely to become the inmates in our prisons, the recipients of government welfare, and the unemployed and underemployed workers in our economy. Worse yet, they are likely to pass on a heritage of under education and poverty to their children.

To address this problem, the Legislature directed the Building Bridges Workgroup (SHB 1573) to make recommendations to reduce our state's dropout rate. This report is the culmination of a year of Workgroup efforts, completed by nearly 90 committee and subcommittee members.

The Building Bridges Workgroup urges bold and comprehensive action at the state and local level to solve this problem. We propose actions in three primary areas to change the systems that provide support for struggling students and dropouts.

First, the state must create a clear vision and goals to address the dropout issue and track progress toward achieving them. State policymakers must direct state agencies to work with each other and with schools, families, and communities to achieve those goals so that we have a coordinated system of cross-agency supports at the state and local level.

Second, school districts need resources and systems to plan and develop comprehensive, culturally relevant dropout prevention and intervention programs and activities, and to improve their capacity to work effectively with families and the local community to help all students graduate.

Third, we must create a dropout retrieval system which provides a meaningful career pathway option for students who have dropped out and are not likely to return to the K–12 school system. We cannot afford to give up on the many thousands of youth who have already dropped out or are so credit deficient that completion of a diploma before age 21 is highly unlikely. They need specialized and adequately funded education programs that are an integral part of the Washington State's basic education system.

1. Set an Educational Goal for Youth-Serving Agencies and Coordinate Efforts to Achieve It.

State policymakers need to identify the dropout issue as a priority by establishing a goal for state agencies and local communities to work towards. Partnerships across separately funded systems are needed to counter the multiple factors that cause students to dropout of school, and to engage and educate students who have dropped out. State-level agencies must be directed to continue to make the dropout issue a

cross-agency priority, and to coordinate their work in implementing programs and providing professional development.

The Legislature should take the following steps to ensure cross-agency coordination of programs that serve vulnerable youth:

Recommendation 1.1: Set a statutory goal, including targets for reducing disproportionality, to address the dropout problem as follows:

1.1.A: Establish a 2015 target for the percentage of students that will graduate from high school.

1.1.B: Establish a 2015 target for the percentage of youth who have dropped out to reengage in education and be college and work ready.

Recommendation 1.2: Direct state agencies that provide major programs for at-risk youth and dropouts to develop programmatic objectives and measures to help meet the state dropout goals and to work together to achieve those goals. Specifically, the Legislature should direct state agencies to provide:

1.2.A: Protocols and templates for model agreements on sharing records and data to improve outcomes for at-risk youth.

1.2.B: Professional development within existing resources that informs staff about the latest research in working with at-risk youth and provides knowledge about programs and services for such youth.

2. Build Local Dropout Prevention and Intervention Systems and Practices.

Currently, school districts lack the time and resources to sufficiently address the dropout issue. Many do not have comprehensive systems in place to develop or use high quality data to monitor student progress in a timely manner and analyze data that will provide a warning of who is at-risk of dropping out. Most school districts need additional resources to develop comprehensive, system reform-focused action plans to reduce dropout rates and to implement promising dropout prevention and retrieval strategies and programs. Many do not have adequate time and resources to build partnerships with families and communities.

Effective dropout prevention and retrieval efforts must be part of a sustained, well planned system in each local school district and community. They must deliver relevant education, provide guidance and counseling, monitor student progress in real time, provide access to nonacademic support, tailor individual plans and targeted strategies for individual students, and include administrative support to partner with families and the community.

The Legislature should take the following initial steps to develop such a system:

Recommendation 2.1: At a minimum, funding for the Building Bridges Program should continue at the current level ($5 million) in the 2009–11 Biennium. Grant criteria should be modified by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) to provide more state-level direction to school districts to ensure they implement a school improvement planning process that addresses the full continuum of dropout prevention, intervention, and retrieval activities.

Recommendation 2.2: Legislative enhancements to public education should include basic education funding for school districts to develop and use quality data in order to implement and maintain early warning data systems, as developed by OSPI, that analyze school and district dropout patterns and provide in-time student progress monitoring.

Recommendation 2.3: Legislative enhancements to public education should include basic education funding for programs and support systems that motivate students and address academic and nonacademic barriers to learning, including:
- Comprehensive guidance and counseling.
- Enhanced funding for career and technical education.
- Enhanced funding for the learning assistance program and modification of the program to allow for expenditures to address nonacademic issues.
- Improved funding ratios for pupil support staff.
- Improved funding ratios for school nurses and grants to implement and sustain coordinated school health models that link with community providers.

3. Create A Dropout Retrieval System For 16 to 21 Year Old Youth Who Are Not Likely To Return To High School.

The 20,000 plus students who dropout every year in Washington clearly indicates that there is a need to develop a retrieval system as part of our basic education system. This system must provide an alternative educational pathway for 16 to 21 year old youth who are not likely to return to high school but who still need an education in order to become economically self-sufficient and to contribute as part of our state's workforce. While prevention and intervention efforts will help address this problem, local school districts will still face significant challenges in retrieving the dropouts who are so far behind in credits that graduation is unlikely. Luckily, successful retrieval/reengagement programs, funded with Basic Education Act (BEA) dollars, have existed for years and can serve as replicable models to serve these youth.

There remains, however, a key problem that this workgroup recommends be addressed. Reengagement programs exist in a piecemeal fashion and current regulations do not provide clear authority for these programs to operate. As a result, many school districts are unwilling to enter into contracts for dropout retrieval programs outside the K–12 system. Several retrieval programs serving hundreds of students have either been forced to close down or are on the brink of closure. This means decreasing and

inconsistent access at a time when we need increased and systematic access in order to adequately serve the thousands of dropouts across the state.

The development of a statewide system of dropout retrieval programs will require building on what we already have and know but going further to identify consistent programmatic goals, create a regional administrative structure, develop consistent contracting mechanisms, BEA reimbursement rates, and adopt clear and uniform standards and eligibility criteria. Therefore, the Legislature should:

Recommendation 3.1: Establish a statewide dropout retrieval system with programmatic goals for students to make significant basic skill gains, complete a high school credential, gain college and work readiness skills, and obtain an industry credential or certificate.

Recommendation 3.2: Develop a single, comprehensive regulatory framework to guide and govern dropout retrieval programs. Regulations should include:
- Eligibility requirements based on nonattendance, credit to age ratio, and/or recommendations from third parties (i.e., juvenile justice staff, foster care case managers, DSHS case managers) to ensure appropriate student placement.
- Standards for required program service elements (case management, specialized instruction, teaching qualifications, access to support services) and program outcomes.
- Standards for billing and reimbursement methodology.

Recommendation 3.3: Establish the authority for regional partnerships to design services for 16 to 21 year old youth who have dropped out and are not likely to return to high school and identify a lead agency to contract for such services. Partners and eligible contractors should include school districts, educational service districts, workforce development councils, community and technical colleges, skills centers, nonprofit organizations, and other governmental or tribal entities.

inconsistent access at a time when we need increased and systematic access in order to adequately serve the thousands of dropouts across the state.

The development of a statewide system of dropout retrieval programs will require building on what we already have and know but going further to identify consistent programmatic goals, create a regional administrative structure, develop consistent contracting mechanisms, BEA reimbursement rates, and adopt clear and uniform standards and eligibility criteria. Therefore, the Legislature should:

Recommendation 3.1: Establish a statewide dropout retrieval system with programmatic goals for students to make significant basic skill gains, complete a high school credential, gain college and work readiness skills, and obtain an industry credential or certificate.

Recommendation 3.2: Develop a single, comprehensive regulatory framework to guide and govern dropout retrieval programs. Regulations should include:
- Eligibility requirements based on nonattendance, credit to age ratio, and/or recommendations from third parties (i.e., juvenile justice staff, foster care case managers, DSHS case managers) to ensure appropriate student placement.
- Standards for required program service elements (case management, specialized instruction, teaching qualifications, access to support services) and program outcomes.
- Standards for billing and reimbursement methodology.

Recommendation 3.3: Establish the authority for regional partnerships to design services for 16 to 21 year old youth who have dropped out and are not likely to return to high school and identify a lead agency to contract for such services. Partners and eligible contractors should include school districts, educational service districts, workforce development councils, community and technical colleges, skills centers, nonprofit organizations, and other governmental or tribal entities.