



# JA Graduation Pathways™



# The Challenge

Every day, 7,000 students drop out of high school. Last year, 1.3 million failed to graduate. By 2020, 15 million more will join them.<sup>1</sup> Overall, young people who drop out are twice as likely as graduates to be unemployed; three times as likely to live in poverty; eight times as likely to wind up in prison; and twice as likely to become the parent of a child who drops out of school.<sup>2</sup>

The dropout crisis directly affects the U.S. economy. Over the course of a student's lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about \$260,000 less than a high school graduate<sup>3</sup> and contributes about \$60,000 less in taxes.<sup>4</sup> Conservative estimates show that the nation's economy would have benefited over time from nearly \$335 billion in additional income if the students who dropped out of the Class of 2009 had graduated.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the need for a high school diploma at a minimum is critical as jobs become more complex in a global economy and traditional jobs requiring less education are no longer in demand.

Dropping out of school is a gradual process of disengagement<sup>6</sup> and students have been shown to demonstrate warning signs as early as kindergarten.<sup>7</sup> However, research evidence demonstrates that a key intervention time is middle school. During this time, the gap between highest- and lowest-performing students widens considerably.<sup>8</sup> According to a recent study, students who fall off track in 6th grade are significantly more likely to drop out of school before their junior year begins.<sup>9</sup> "This complicated period of transition has often been associated with a decline in academic achievement, performance motivation, and self-perceptions. It is a time when young adolescents are most likely to experiment with at-risk behaviors. It is also the point at which children begin to make pivotal decisions regarding their academic and career choices."<sup>10</sup>



While there has been significant attention placed on the high school dropout rate, for more than 2 million students graduation is still "no better than close to a 50/50 proposition."<sup>11</sup> To address this issue, researchers and educators must continue to explore effective and scalable models. Community organizations must continue to collaborate with school districts to provide an integrated solution. In addition to providing high-quality teachers and tested pedagogy, students must see the direct relevance of what they are learning in the classroom to their future; understand the value of having a high school diploma at a minimum; and develop the internal drive and belief that they can be successful.

<sup>1</sup> Alliance for Education. (2008). [www.all4ed.org/files/HighCost.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/files/HighCost.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> America's Promise Alliance.

<sup>3</sup> [www.tc.columbia.edu/i/a/3082\\_SocialCostsofInadequateEducation.pdf](http://www.tc.columbia.edu/i/a/3082_SocialCostsofInadequateEducation.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Rouse, C. E. (2005). "Labor market consequences of an inadequate education." Paper prepared for the symposium on the Social Costs of Inadequate Education, Teachers College Columbia University, October 2005.

<sup>5</sup> [www.all4ed.org/files/HighCost.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/files/HighCost.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Lan, W., & Lanthier, R. (2003). Changes in students' academic performance of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 8(3), 309-332. Neild, R.C., Balfanz, R., & Herzog, L. (2007). An early warning system. *Educational Leadership*, 65(2), 28-33.

<sup>7</sup> Hickman, G. P., Bartholomew, M., Mathwig, J., & Heinrich, R. S. (2008). Differential developmental pathways of high school dropouts and graduates. *Journal of Educational Research*, 102(1), 3-14.

<sup>8</sup> Dweck et al, "Implicit Theories of Intelligence Predict Achievement Across an Adolescent Transition: A Longitudinal Study and an Intervention," *Child Development*, January/February 2007, Volume 78, Number 1; Wagner, "Early Adolescents' Development across the Middle School Years: Implications for School Counselors," December 2005.; Eccles and Wigfield, "Young Adolescent Development," in "What Current Research Says to the Middle Level Practitioner," 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Balfanz, "Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path," National Middle School Association, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> NCMISA, "Supporting Students in Their Transition to Middle School," A Position Paper Jointly Adopted by the National Middle School Association and the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

<sup>11</sup> Balfanz, R., Bridgeland, J.M., Moore, L.A., & Fox, J.H. (2010, November). Building a grad nation: Progress and challenge in ending the high school dropout epidemic. Retrieved from <http://www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Grad-Nation/Building-a-Grad-Nation.aspx>.

# Junior Achievement's Research Study

To better understand the high school dropout issue, including the risk factors associated with students quitting school and the key drivers and indicators of high school graduation, Junior Achievement USA conducted an extensive research study in four cities: Cleveland, OH; New York, NY; Los Angeles, CA; and Atlanta, GA. The Bridgespan Group, a nonprofit strategy consulting firm, was hired to facilitate this research phase. Over the course of six months, the Bridgespan Group conducted an in-depth, meta-analysis of relevant research studies to identify the indicators most closely linked to whether students successfully graduate high school. The research study also included a comprehensive review of Junior Achievement's program portfolio to determine the programs with the highest potential for impact on these key indicators. Interviews with volunteers, JA staff, board members, and educators in the four pilot cities were used to develop an organizational model focused on providing students with multiple, in-depth JA experiences at key intervention times — starting at the sixth grade and continuing throughout their middle school years and into high school.



## The Model for Success

JA's vision is to empower young people to own their economic success. High school graduation is essential for this to occur. For decades, Junior Achievement has offered a powerful set of programs that support and enable youth in a number of ways, including in their quest toward high school graduation. Through the research conducted by the Bridgespan Group, Junior Achievement developed a research-based model focused specifically on increasing high school graduation rates and preparing youth with the skills to be college and career ready. This model is focused on seven key elements of success that leverages existing organizational assets and utilizes existing knowledge around what drives high school graduation.

1. Serving students when they are most at-risk, with a focus on reaching students during the middle grade years (grades 6-8) and at key transitions (between grades 5-6 and 8-9). Research demonstrates that a key intervention time is middle school. Based on recent research, approximately 40 percent of potential dropouts could be identified as early as sixth grade based on grade, attendance, and behavioral indicators.<sup>12</sup>
2. Enhancing and scaling programs with the highest potential for success. Through an extensive review and evaluation of JA programs by the Bridgespan Group, a selection of JA programs with the highest potential to increase graduation rates was identified. These programs will be appropriately scaled to drive impact. Further, a key success factor for JA programs is providing students access to a network of caring adult role-models who will bring the content to life by bridging the gap between what students learn in the classroom and the real world.

3. Increasing the dosage of and pipeline between JA programs to maximize impact. Achieving success requires students to be continuously engaged in and receiving the appropriate dosage of JA programming, especially during the middle years. This approach will couple programs to more effectively serve youth and will leverage the power of technology.
4. Partnering with other organizations to catalyze further impact. Program enhancements alone do not sufficiently address all indicators related to graduation. Partnerships with school districts and other youth- and education-focused organizations that complement JA programs are instrumental to success. This approach works to leverage existing partnerships and to develop new ones that will drive further success and impact.
5. Increasing capacity and building competencies to support this work. This approach will utilize a multi-disciplinary team, including engagement from: executive leadership and staff dedicated to programs, development, research and evaluation, marketing, and volunteer coordination to increase program success.
6. Collecting and using data to assess and improve performance. Ample research has been conducted to identify the risk factors associated with students dropping out of school. Research highlights a set of drivers and indicators of high school graduation, including academic performance, educational expectations, school engagement, and deviance. Through a detailed review of existing research, the Bridgespan Group identified approximately 20 key indicators that are most closely linked to dropping out of high school. These indicators were grouped under Junior Achievement USA's core business areas—youth development, education development, and economic development (presented in the table below).

	Education Development	Youth Development	Economic Development
Indicators most closely linked to high school dropout	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Academic achievement</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Attainment</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Mobility	<b>Attitudes:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Education expectations*</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Perception of utility* <input type="checkbox"/> Intrinsic interest* <input type="checkbox"/> Goals* <input type="checkbox"/> Self-esteem* <input type="checkbox"/> Locus of control <input type="checkbox"/> Perception of support  <b>Behaviors:</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>School engagement</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Deviance (in-school)</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Deviance (out-of-school)</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Extracurricular participation</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Course-taking <input type="checkbox"/> Peer association <input type="checkbox"/> Employment <input type="checkbox"/> Pregnancy and parenting	<input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge of 21st century themes* <input type="checkbox"/> Life and career skills* <input type="checkbox"/> Learning and innovation skills* <input type="checkbox"/> Information, media, technology skills*

\*Note: The indicators in bold are most closely linked to whether students graduate. The items with an asterisk are most closely tied with Junior Achievement programming and where JA programs have demonstrated impact or could potentially impact.

<sup>12</sup> Balfanz, "Putting Middle Grades Students on the Graduation Path," National Middle School Association, 2009.

While research reveals that academic performance is the most important driver of high school graduation, there is increasing consensus around the important role attitudes and behaviors play in driving student achievement by acting as the sticking mechanisms that allow for academic performance.

When assessing JA program impact, analysis revealed that JA programs directly impact youth attitudes. Moreover, research suggests that impact on youth attitudes drives student behaviors which, in turn, drive academic achievement. This demonstrates that although JA programs do not directly impact academic achievement, they can play a critical indirect role in ensuring student academic achievement and success.



7. Augmenting the role of Junior Achievement USA to support JA Area success. Junior Achievement USA is committed to the success of this strategy and JA Areas can benefit from this support in a number of ways. This strategy requires JA Areas to collaborate with the JA National Office in new and different ways.

By incorporating these seven key elements of success into the implementation of this research-based model, Junior Achievement USA will empower students to drive their own economic success by providing them with multiple opportunities that increase their motivations and equip them with the tools they need to effectively navigate their paths to graduation and to future career endeavors.

## Next Step—Implementation

Junior Achievement's extensive scope and reach positions the organization well to positively affect graduation rates and student success. With 70 percent of the current student impact made at the elementary grade level, there is a tremendous foundation established for learning and for developing positive attitudes and behaviors. The current organizational strategic imperative to involve middle and high school students encourages JA Areas to scale learning experiences with the highest potential for impact.

To facilitate the successful implementation of this model, Junior Achievement USA will provide support to all of the JA Areas across America that employ this strategy. Significant focus will be placed on measuring the efficacy of this model on students' engagement and motivation in school. JA's philosophy of using rigorous, nationwide evaluations to assess program impact will be applied to this approach.

Further, JA will work to elevate awareness about the importance of this national issue and the opportunities to be part of the solution. New partners will be engaged to build critical capacity and generate resources to accelerate implementation. Alliances will be established that collaboratively influence positive outcomes. Throughout this work, Junior Achievement will remain focused on how to best leverage internal and external resources to drive impact and equip students with the knowledge and skills they need to be college and career ready.