

Parents Critical to Preventing Dropouts

Philadelphia has a serious dropout problem. Every year, about 13,000 students “check out” out of school: more than 8,000 dropout and another 5,000 attend less than 50% of the time. Our students are slipping through the cracks, all but invisible to school personnel for weeks, months, even years.

Here, we are able to identify reasons for student disengagement in order to recognize *ahead of time* those environments and attitudes that impact student success in school. To do this, we turned to our best resource—parents. Listening to parents of **dropouts** and parents of **graduates** helped shape our understanding of how parental attitudes and expectations make a difference in a student’s relationship to school.

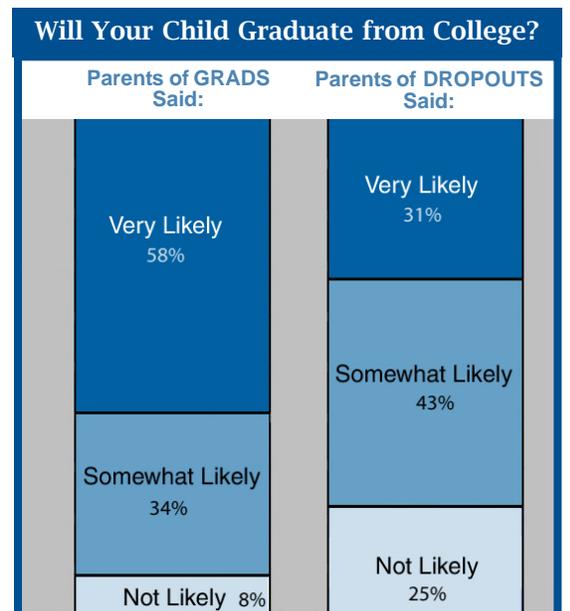
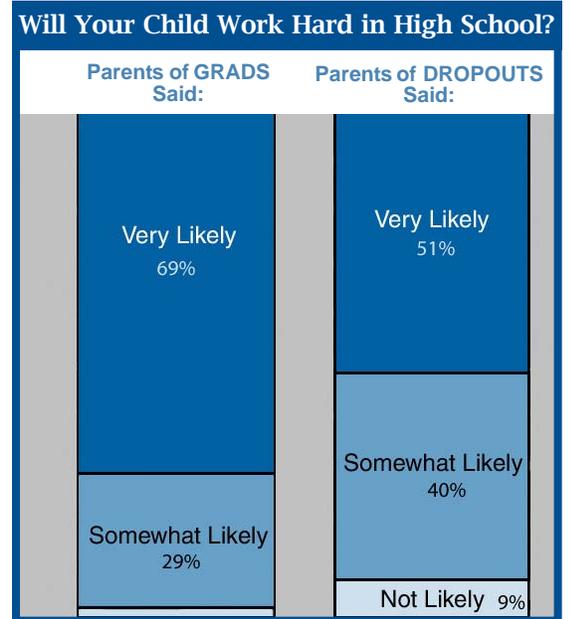
The research presented here is from the Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study (PELS), which tells the story of more than 1,000 students in Philadelphia public schools, and their parents, from the 8th grade to beyond their senior year in high school.

Annual in-depth interviews with parents and students helped us to identify factors that may contribute to a child’s loss of interest in school. This brief shines light on the ways in which academic success depends on a healthy child/parent relationship.

Parent Aspirations and Expectations

Parents have great *aspirations* for their kids. They *hope* that their children will graduate from high school and go on to four-year colleges. But there’s a chasm between parental hopes and expectations. Parents of dropouts surveyed said they *expect* much less from their children than parents of graduates (*see top chart*). Parents of dropouts were also much less likely to *expect* their children to attend college (*see bottom chart*).

Children need to know that their parents expect great things from them. Talk to your children about their academic future. Of the parents surveyed, well over half of parents of graduates talked to their children





Parents Affect the Likelihood of Dropping Out

The Philadelphia Education Fund is an independent non-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of public education throughout the Philadelphia region. For 21 years, the Ed Fund has been working in partnership with school districts, universities, non-profits and businesses to initiate and implement innovative educational programs, improve teacher quality, engage the community in school reform and conduct research. The Ed Fund is one of the largest of 86 education funds affiliated with the Public Education Network. Visit www.philaedfund.org

Executive Director
Carol S. Fixman

Senior Research Associate
Liza Herzog

Research Associate
Barbara Jaffe

Program Director
Brian Armstead

Communications Associate
Diana Rodriguez Wallach

often about college. Just two-fifths of parents of dropouts did.

Imagine if *all* parents commended their children's efforts in school. Imagine if *all* parents expected academic success for their children. Would this make the difference to a child who "checked out" of school in the ninth grade? Might that child have reconsidered? The day children enter high school, they've stepped into a new environment. It's important that they're confident and hopeful. Encountering an unknown place without encouragement makes that place an easy one to leave.

Parents of dropouts had lower expectations than parents of graduates in other key areas as well. They were:

- Less confident that their children would pass classes (42% v 64%).
- Less optimistic that their children would work hard in school (51% v 71%).
- More likely to think that their children would be suspended in high school.
- Less confident that their children would enjoy school or graduate.

Parent Response to Course Failure

Keep in mind that almost two-thirds of children who earned a D or an F in the 8th

grade went on to graduate from high school. Parents of dropouts were much more likely to punish their children for poor grades than were parents of graduates. With encouragement, these children could have made it to graduation.

What Parents Can Do

How can you help keep your child on track to graduation?

- **DO pay close attention to your child's schoolwork.** This does *not* mean that you need to understand all of it! Ask your child about time spent at school.
- **DO explore multiple ways to respond to poor grades.** Significant numbers of students—both eventual dropouts and graduates—earned Ds and Fs when they were in the 8th grade. Punishing children for receiving poor grades has not been shown to improve student performance. When schoolwork gets challenging, talk to your child about working hard, not about being smart. Encourage persistence. Be realistic, consistent and firm. For more information, visit **Teachers and Families Working Together**, <http://www.teachersandfamilies.com>, or **The National Education Association**, <http://www.nea.org>.

Philadelphia Education Fund

7 Benjamin Franklin Parkway
Suite 700
Philadelphia, PA 19103
T# (215)665-1400
F# (215) 864-2494

The Philadelphia Education Fund's Community Learning Briefs are designed to keep parents, families and communities central to the academic success of our young people.

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