

CORE POLICY # 2

Keep Children in School until They Have Completed Secondary School

The most common terms used to define the main stages of nonuniversity education are primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary. Primary schooling starts between the ages of 5 and 7 and is compulsory; lower secondary begins between the ages of 10 and 14 and is compulsory in most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean; and upper secondary begins between the ages of 14 and 16 and is typically not compulsory.¹

Today most middle-income countries have achieved universal primary education, but they continue to face enormous challenges in trying to achieve the same enrollment and graduation rates in secondary schools. This is due to both demand and supply-side constraints that are faced by many poor young people and their families, including the inability of families to pay for secondary education;² a lack of knowledge about the returns from secondary education; a lack of information about schooling options; the low quality and irrelevance of much secondary schooling; a lack of access to secondary schools; and the opportunity costs faced by some poor families in sending their children to school because of their dependence on child labor. The implementation of policies to encourage secondary school enrollment and completion are critical because secondary school completion is one of the most important preventive investments a country can make in at-risk youth—both in terms of improving their educational outcomes and of reducing nearly all risky kinds of behavior.³

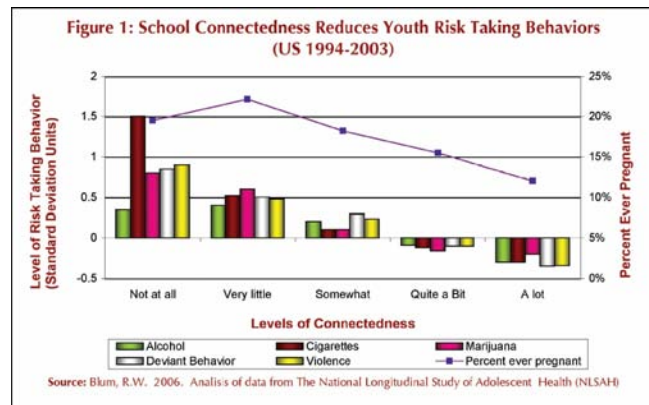
Examples of policies that have shown to be successful in improving secondary school enrollment and completion—particularly when implemented together—include the following:

- (i) Provide *financial incentives*, such as conditional cash transfers (CCTs), school vouchers, loans, grants, individual learning accounts, school supplies, and free public transportation to school, to increase the demand for secondary school and offset competing demands such as work and child care.
- (ii) Take steps to *improve school quality*, such as strengthening the connection between school and work; improving teacher training and increasing their experience; reducing teacher absenteeism; involving the local community as monitors of both teacher and student performance; initiating peer tutoring programs; introducing innovative programming, such as nonformal education; eliminating grade repetition; improving the quality of infrastructure; and making schools safe and accessible.
- (iii) Provide *second chance* programs, such as literacy and comprehensive educational/job training programs that provide young people who are not in school with the opportunity to complete high school and enter tertiary education or the labor market.
- (iv) *Combine approaches* into programs that use one or more of the elements above.

How Does Completing Secondary School Prevent Risky Youth Behavior?

Completing secondary school can serve as one of the strongest protective factors for young people in two key ways: through the knowledge and skills that they acquire, which enable them to make informed decisions, and through the sense of connectedness that students often feel to adults within the school. School connectedness is based on the idea that most young people want the support and approval of a caring adult and, if this is forthcoming as a reward for positive behavior, then the young person will behave in a positive manner. Furthermore, young people behave more positively in an environment where they feel safe and

accepted. Schools can serve both of these functions and, when combined with caring parents or other adults outside of the school, the probability of reducing risky behavior is even greater.



Studies in the United States, Brazil, the Caribbean, Mexico, Honduras, and Chile have shown that increasing the students' sense of connection to their schools decreases absenteeism, fighting, bullying, and vandalism. A sense of connection also promotes educational motivation and classroom engagement, improves academic performance, and increases school attendance and completion rates (see figure). Students who feel more connected to their schools are less likely than others to exhibit disruptive and violent behavior, carry or use a weapon, experiment with illegal substances, smoke cigarettes, drink to the point of becoming intoxicated, appear emotionally distressed, consider or attempt suicide, or engage in sexual intercourse at an early age. In addition to improved educational outcomes, evidence also shows that sexual and reproductive health outcomes are better, the higher the number of years of schooling attained by young people. Better academic performance is also consistently associated with a lower likelihood of reporting ever having had sexual intercourse, and education is also associated with decreased pregnancy rates. Commitment to school has also been one of the few protective factors that has been found to reduce exposure to specific risks for violence.⁴ Conversely, school failure and dropout are risk factors for youth violence and delinquency.⁵

Research Findings: Providing the Evidence Base

Financial incentives. Mexico's CCT program, *Oportunidades*, increased secondary enrollment rates by 8 percent, the transition to secondary school by nearly 20 percent, and grade attainment by 10 percent, with significantly larger effects for girls than boys.⁶ Preliminary results from Brazil's *Bolsa Escola* program have shown that participants had lower dropout rates (0.4 versus 5.6), higher promotion rates (80 versus 72 percent), and were more likely to enter school at the right age than nonparticipants.⁷ Evidence from Colombia's *Familias en Acción* CCT program has shown that the program substantially increased the school attendance of children ages 12 to 17 by 10.1 percentage points in rural areas and 5.2 percentage points in urban areas.⁸ Preliminary studies of Turkey's CCT program, the *Social Risk Management Project*, showed an increase in the net primary enrollment rate from 82.6 to 89.7 percent and from 65.4 to 73.6 percent in the net secondary school enrollment rate.⁹ Also, a program in Colombia that offered vouchers to poor individuals to attend private schools (PACES) had a positive long-term impact on their learning achievement.¹⁰ The United States' (Ohio) *Learning, Earning, and Parenting* (LEAP) program is a mandatory statewide program that provides financial incentives, in addition to case management services, transportation, and child care assistance, to encourage young mothers on welfare to enroll in school and attend regularly. The program provides bonuses of US\$62 for monthly attendance and for completing the school year, US\$62 monthly sanctions for inadequate attendance, and a US\$200 bonus for completing high school or receiving a General Educational Development (GED) credential. An evaluation of the LEAP program reported that three years after the random assignment of young mothers to either a control or a treatment group, 48.4 percent of LEAP teens

dropped out compared with 53.5 percent of control group teens, but this difference was not statistically significant. The study also showed that 50 percent of treatment group members completed grade 11 compared with 45.4 percent of control group members, which was not a statistically significant difference. Lastly, the study demonstrated that 34 percent of LEAP teens completed high school or earned a GED compared with 31.9 percent of control group students.¹¹

Improving school quality. The United States's *First Things First* program is predicated on the importance of training teachers to create supportive and engaged schools and classrooms. The program's goal is to produce respectful and productive student-teacher relationships through intensive, high-quality teaching that combines high expectations of students with continued support. The program creates high, clear, and fair academic and behavioral standards by establishing small learning communities. The program also includes a family advocacy component and ongoing student performance assessments. Evaluations of the program have shown that it led to reduced suspensions and increased attendance, parent participation, and reading achievement.¹² The *Skills, Opportunity, and Recognition* (SOAR) program is another example of a U.S. program that combines teacher and parent training to increase children's engagement with their schools and to prevent early school leaving. The program, based on the theory that social bonds can reduce antisocial behavior and delinquency, instructs teachers on proactive school management, interactive teaching, and cooperative learning. An evaluation of the program that was carried out using a nonrandomized controlled trial found significant reductions in sexual risk behavior among students who participated in the program. Those in the full intervention group reported having significantly fewer sexual partners than those in the control group, and females in the treatment group had a significantly reduced likelihood of both becoming pregnant and giving birth by the age of 21.¹³

Introducing second chance programs. An evaluation of a program in Chile that enabled pregnant teens and adolescent mothers to attend school showed that mothers who participated in the program were more likely to enter the labor market than a control group with similar characteristics.¹⁴ In Trinidad and Tobago, participants in the *Corcorite Learning Center*, which provides two-year remedial education for young people aged 12 to 15 who have not passed the common high school entrance exam and face a series of psychological, family, and behavioral problems, have high rates of passing the entrance exam as well as of finding jobs or places in further education.¹⁵

Combined approaches. Studies of the *Quantum Opportunities Program* in the United States, which provides financial incentives to young people to participate in school as well as mentoring, academic support, after-school activities, and life skills development, have shown that program participants were more likely to graduate, had higher educational expectations, were more likely to attend post-secondary schools, and became teen parents less often than those in the control group.¹⁶ In the United States, an experimental study of the *Career Academy* program, which combines academic and technical curricula based on specific career paths and establishes partnerships with local employers to provide work-based learning opportunities, showed that participants were less likely to drop out of school, had better attendance, and earned more credits than those in the control group.¹⁷ The *Futures Sponsor-A-Scholar Program* in Philadelphia, PA (United States) provides students from public high schools with long-term mentoring (during high school and for one year after graduation), academic support, help with college application process, and financial support for college. Evaluations of the program have found significant positive effects on high school test scores and college attendance. Evaluations of the U.S. program *Project GRAD*—a comprehensive dropout prevention program that combines college preparation and scholarships, academic support, case management, family strengthening, and school/classroom environment—showed gains in college attendance, as well as decreases in discipline referrals and gains in math and reading test scores for participating students, as compared to those in control schools.¹⁸ An initial evaluation of the United Kingdom's *Aimhigher* program, which tries to increase the entry of underprivileged youth into higher education by targeting underprivileged 13–19 year-olds and increasing their awareness and understanding of benefits of higher education through a Web portal, mentoring, and visits to universities, showed that the program had a positive effect on promotion rates and test performance, but mixed results on intentions to go on to higher education.¹⁹

Endnotes

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Moving Forward: Factors for Success

- ***Adjust teacher training, staffing, and school environment to increase student connectedness*** with school.
- ***Provide information on schooling options and opportunities*** to those who have left school (for example, through NGOs) or who engage in behavior or face constraints that may lead them to leave school early.
- Offer ***financial incentives*** to poor young people and their families.
- Offer a ***relevant curriculum*** that is closely linked to the realities of the workplace by combining academic and vocational curricula as well as teaching life skills.
- ***Involve families and communities*** in monitoring both student and teacher performance.
- ***Train teachers in innovative and nonformal teaching methods and programs.***
- Offer ***second-chance programs*** that can get early leavers back in school.

Key Implementation Considerations	
Anticipated Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased educational attainment • Increased likelihood of continuing education and/or training • Increased employability and likelihood of entering formal labor market • Improved sexual and reproductive health outcomes • Delay in marriage and childbearing for females
Secondary Effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduced criminal and violent behavior and incarceration rates • Reduced alcohol and substance abuse • Decrease in the total number of babies born and improved health of children • Increased civic participation
Responsible Agency/Actor	Ministry of Education or the private sector
Targeted Risk Group	Types I, II, III
Target Age Group	12–18 years of age
Examples of Cost per Beneficiary	Mexico <i>Oportunidades</i> : Maximum household monthly transfer with children in high school: US\$170 (<i>Source</i> : World Bank 2007)
Necessary Initial Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completion of primary education • Existence of quality secondary schools and school supplies • Financing and targeting mechanisms to provide financial incentives to poor young people and their families • Supply of teachers trained to teach the secondary school curricula • Elimination of regulations that would keep pregnant teens out of school • Family and community involvement
Specific Examples & Levels of Effectiveness (Strong Evidence or Emerging Evidence)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mexico: <i>Oportunidades</i>—Strong evidence (www.oportunidades.gob.mx) • Brazil: <i>Bolsa Escola</i>—Strong evidence • Colombia: <i>Familias en Acción</i>—Strong evidence (http://www.accionsocial.gov.co) • United States: <i>Quantum Opportunities Program</i>—Strong evidence (www.oicofamerica.org/onlprog.html) • United States: Philadelphia’s <i>Futures Sponsor-a-Scholar</i> program—Strong evidence (http://philadelphiafutures.org/sas_high_school) • United States: SOAR—Strong evidence (http://depts.washington.edu/sdrg) • United States: <i>Career Academies</i>—Strong evidence (http://casn.berkeley.edu) • United States: Project GRAD—Strong evidence (www.projectgrad.org) • United States (Ohio): <i>Learning, Earning, and Parenting</i> (LEAP) program—Emerging evidence • United Kingdom: <i>Aimhigher</i>—Strong evidence • Turkey: <i>Social Risk Management</i> project—Emerging evidence
Issues to Consider for Replication and Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost-sharing and public-private partnerships to finance expansion and improvement of secondary schools • Sufficient financing to fund a 100 percent increase in the number of secondary schools (in most LAC countries) and supply-side incentives