



## GradNation Messaging Framework

*A Tool for Communicating about the High School Experience and the Graduation Milestone*

Over the past decade, the nation has made notable progress in improving the high school experience and raising graduation rates across the country. Despite this progress, however, the national goal of reaching a 90 percent four-year graduation rate has not been met, and vast inequities remain. Conversations about this reality often lead with the ways that the education system overall, and high schools in particular, are failing the nation's young people. Additionally, deficit-based narratives about young people's shortcomings, disengagement, or lack of motivation to complete high school fails to recognize the systemic barriers that prevent many students from reaching the graduation milestone. These narratives are not only misleading—they also make achieving the goal of a 90 percent national graduation rate feel distant and unattainable.

**The youth-supporting field needs a better, clearer, and more mobilizing narrative. One that communicates the possible. One that focuses on the strengths and identities of young people; what adolescents need during this crucial and promising time in their lives; and how high schools, in collaboration with their partners, are working to meet those needs and help students thrive.**

This narrative is even more essential amidst a global pandemic, as inequities have deepened and high schools and community partners are working tirelessly to meet students' needs in both virtual and in-person environments. Additionally, sharper calls for racial equity have amplified the need for a stronger message about the role that high schools and their partners can play in confronting and addressing institutional and systemic racism. It's true that there are many persistent challenges that high schools, alone, cannot fix. However, the high school experience can help or hinder students' progress toward the graduation milestone. Despite the many challenges this moment presents, it also offers an urgent opportunity for a laser-like focus on what matters most for adolescents and a strong, youth-centered narrative that reflects what can be done when we work together.

## About This Messaging

### WHY MESSAGING?

This messaging framework is based on three foundational beliefs:

1. The narrative about young people, high schools, and graduation rates has not kept pace with the expanded understanding of adolescent development, nor the growing mainstream consciousness of the effects of systemic barriers and adverse experiences on wellbeing and learning.
2. The youth-supporting field must send clear, youth-centered messages about how adolescents learn and the role that high schools play in that process.
3. Finding coherence in how we talk about the high school experience can help us more effectively advocate for necessary changes in systems and practices so that our national goal of a 90 percent graduation rate becomes a reality.

## GradNation

AMERICA'S PROMISE ALLIANCE®

The GradNation campaign was conceptualized around a growing consensus that the high school graduation rate signals both economic opportunity for those who graduate and the health of the nation. Since 2010, the campaign has worked to mobilize people across sectors around the common cause of reaching a 90 percent national four-year graduation rate by providing relevant data, promising strategies, and opportunities to connect and learn from one another. More information can be found at [gradnation.americaspromise.org](https://gradnation.americaspromise.org).

### About the 90 Percent Goal

In 2010, America's Promise Alliance joined with President Barack Obama, General Colin Powell and Alma Powell, and Secretary Arne Duncan in setting a national goal of a 90 percent four-year graduation rate by the class of 2020. For some students, a four-year timeline does not make sense, due to other obligations or factors outside of school—which is why the goal was not set at 100%. Since 2010, four U.S. presidents and dozens of organizations have embraced the goal, unifying the country around a specific data point. This level of agreement has helped states and communities focus their policy and practice efforts and more effectively advocate on behalf of young people. Data for the class of 2020 will not be available until 2022, but more important than the timeline itself is the push for states, communities, and schools to consider what needs to happen in order to support more students to reach the graduation milestone.

The purpose and contribution of this document is to provide common language for communicating about how the high school experience can cultivate the conditions for more students to graduate and thrive during and after high school. Over the past decade, the GradNation campaign—together with numerous national, state, and community partners—has worked to amplify knowledge about what young people need and how the high school experience can meet those needs. This document has been collaboratively designed to synthesize that existing knowledge, principles, and language in a digestible way to help the field clearly and collectively articulate a more optimistic narrative about young people, high school, and graduation rates.

## HOW CAN IT BE USED?

Whether crafting funding proposals, leading media briefings, or engaging in other case-making activities, our hope is that states, districts, schools, community organizations, educators, policymakers, scholars, and other youth-supporting leaders can incorporate this messaging into their work as they see fit. We are eager to hear feedback and ongoing input on how the language and messages are being used and received so that this framework can become a living document that is strengthened and refined over time for the benefit of the youth-supporting field.

# THE CORE MESSAGING FRAMEWORK

The language below is reflective of the foundational knowledge that has emerged over the past decade of focused effort in improving high school graduation rates, including knowledge from research, practitioners, and young people themselves. The sections below are not intended to present new ideas—rather, they are designed to present this foundational knowledge in a clear and digestible way.

## Making the Case: Who Benefits from a High Graduation Rate?

### High school graduates experience personal and professional benefits.

Graduates have longer life expectancies, better health outcomes, higher average incomes, are more likely to complete postsecondary education and training, and are more likely to be employed—88 percent of available jobs in 2020 require at least a high school diploma.

### High school graduates contribute to the health of the national economy.

Reaching a 90 percent graduation rate for just one cohort of students would mean the country would see a \$3.1 billion increase in annual earnings, create more than 14,000 new jobs, and save \$16.1 billion in health care costs.

### High school graduates promote positive community outcomes.

Graduates are more likely to vote and be civically engaged, which improves living conditions for people in their community.

## Evaluating our Progress: How Far Have We Come?

### Progress has been the rule, not the exception.

In 2010, the nation came together to establish the goal of a national 90 percent four-year graduation rate. Since then, the rate has steadily increased—from 78 percent in 2010 to 85.3 percent in 2018 (the year for which the most recent data are available).

### Progress has been uneven and inequitable.

Despite consistent progress overall, vast disparities remain. Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students are overrepresented in high schools with the lowest graduation rates, as are English learners, students experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, and students from families with low income. These disparities point to the reality that current systems and structures are not working for every student.

### Progress has been threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 has brought about significant, if not yet fully understood, disruptions to education at all levels and has deepened already troublesome disparities. We may now be facing a period where progress is no longer the rule, during which existing disparities could potentially widen.

# Reframing the Conversation: What Do Adolescents Need, and How Can the High School Experience Address Those Needs?

There are many persistent challenges that high schools, alone, cannot fix. However, the past decade of learning has demonstrated that the overall high school experience can help or hinder students' progress toward the graduation milestone. Much of what has been learned revolves around the science of adolescent brain development and what they need during this critical time in their lives.

## WHAT DO ADOLESCENTS NEED?

Next to infancy, adolescence is the single most dramatic period of brain development. Although no two adolescents are the same, research points to consistently important components of adolescent development that should inform the high school experience.

- **Adolescents need supportive relationships.** During adolescence, relationships with both adults and peers are critically important as adolescents develop a stronger sense of their own identities, interests, beliefs, and long-term goals.
- **Adolescents need agency.** Adolescents require sufficient autonomy, opportunities to express their voice, and power over their learning and choices.
- **Adolescents need exploration.** Adolescents learn from their experiences and develop healthy behaviors when they are able to take risks and explore different ideas and ways of being.
- **Adolescents need relevance.** Adolescents begin to engage more deeply with intellectual ideas and apply their skills to real-world problems.
- **Adolescents need support.** Trauma, stress, and adversity affect how adolescents' brains develop and their ability to learn.
- **Adolescents need belonging.** Adolescents are particularly attuned to how they are perceived, treated, and welcomed into educational and other spaces.

## HOW CAN THE HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE ADDRESS THOSE NEEDS?

States, districts, schools, and communities across the country have worked to create youth-centered high school experiences that are informed by the research on adolescent development and are rooted in a commitment to equity and sharing power with young people. These efforts can create the conditions for each and every student to learn, graduate, and thrive during and after high school.

### More students graduate and thrive when their high school experience fosters meaningful learning *and* wellbeing.

Students are more likely to be engaged in their learning and are less likely to leave before graduating when the high school experience:

- meaningfully connects academic learning to students' lives, interests, and goals;
- promotes supportive relationships with and between adults and peers;
- supports their intellectual exploration and critical thinking;
- provides opportunities for students to express agency;
- is infused with substantive experiences to learn and grow outside of school; and
- includes flexible pathways to a variety of postsecondary pursuits.

### More students thrive when their high school experience identifies and responds to systemic barriers.

Students are more likely to be engaged in their learning and are less likely to leave before graduating when the high school experience:

- nurtures and responds to their unique identities and experiences;
- fosters an inclusive and supportive climate in which students can learn and grow from both successes and mistakes;
- offers academic and mental health supports to mitigate the effects of trauma and adverse experiences; and
- provides wraparound support that addresses the non-academic barriers to learning.

### What do we mean by adolescents?

At various points throughout this document we refer specifically to adolescents, as opposed to "young people" more broadly. Adolescence generally refers to the period between childhood and emerging adulthood and captures the developmental stage of the vast majority of high school students. Brain research indicates that adolescence—particularly during the teenage years—is a critical period of rapid and rich growth and development both intellectually and emotionally. For this reason, we use that term explicitly when articulating messages about what adolescents need, as we are referring specifically to youth within that developmental period.

### What do we mean by systemic barriers?

By "systemic barriers" we mean structural and/or situational adversities that can affect learning, wellbeing, and one's ability to graduate. Structural barriers are things that are built into society and the institutions with which a student interacts, such as racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and/or a lack of access to basic needs like food or safe housing. These structural barriers can lead to more personal, situational adversities like mental health challenges, experiencing homelessness, or involvement with the juvenile justice system. This is not an exhaustive list of barriers a young person may encounter, and there is a fine line between structural and situational barriers. However, we must keep these and other barriers in mind when communicating about the high school experience and the ways in which it can and cannot address them.

## Shifting the Narrative: How Can Our Language Better Reflect Reality?

Ultimately, our language should reflect the reality of how adolescents learn, what they need, and the role that the high school experience can play in addressing those needs. The examples below are suggestions for shifting the narrative in favor of a more youth-centered, evidence-informed framing of adolescents, the high school experience, and graduation.

**From** "fixing" young people **to** improving learning environments.  
*Language should make the case for adjusting systems, not students.*

**From** doing things for young people **to** partnering with young people as collaborative decision-makers.  
*Language should point to the need to incorporate student perspectives into the design of their learning environments.*

**From** a "regardless of race/income/etc." narrative that lacks nuance and specificity **to** a narrative that is acutely responsive to young people's identities and experiences.  
*Language should acknowledge and honor the diversity of students' backgrounds and experiences rather than erasing it.*

**From** norms based around a white-dominant model **to** an approach rooted in the strengths and diversity of each and every young person and community.  
*Language should embrace the diversity of cultures, contexts, and individual experiences that inform all learning and development.*

**From** empty equity statements **to** an active pursuit of anti-racist policies and practices.  
*Language should be as specific as possible about what equity really means.*

**From** "special education" **to** accessible education.  
*Language should address ableism rather than normalizing only one neurotype.*

**From** labeling youth of color as "minorities" **to** naming, elevating, and celebrating racial and ethnic identities.  
*Language should avoid insinuating inferiority.*

**From** calling young people "dropouts" **to** referring to them as youth who leave school before graduating.  
*Language should reflect the reality that students leave school for a variety of reasons and no young person should be labeled based on their circumstances.*

**From** a focus on discipline as punishment **to** a culture of inquiry, reflection, learning, and healing.  
*Language should prioritize wellbeing and growth over punishment.*

**From** discussions of high schools alone **to** a recognition of the role that out-of-school programs and community organizations play in the fabric of the high school experience.  
*Language should acknowledge that schools are embedded within communities that provide students with essential support, resources, and relationships.*

**From** a narrative that schools are failing **to** an acknowledgement that schools are often unfairly expected to correct all of society's deeply-entrenched inequities.  
*Language should reflect the reality that structural inequities, not schools and teachers, are often the cause of disparate outcomes.*

**From** labeling schools or students as "low-performing" **to** talking about data as a way to allocate resources equitably.  
*Language should point to equitable solutions rather than the results of inequitable circumstances.*

**From** framing disparities as an "achievement gap" **to** recognizing the "opportunity gap" as a predictable result of societal inequities.  
*Language should focus on the root of disparities.*

**From** "college readiness" **to** the ability to thrive in postsecondary pursuits.  
*Language should challenge the notion that a narrowly-defined "readiness" can indicate what any individual may want or need to thrive in adulthood.*

**From** blaming school staff **to** viewing teachers and staff as whole people who also need support and resources.  
*Language should build teachers up and acknowledge the severe under-investment many teachers face.*

**From** "dropout factories" **to** under-resourced schools.  
*Language should hold schools accountable while signaling that schools must be sufficiently resourced to give students what they need.*

**From** graduation as the end goal **to** graduation as a stepping stone.  
*Language should position graduation as an important milestone that opens doors in adulthood, rather than an end in itself.*

## How This Messaging Was Developed

The messaging incorporates principles and lessons learned from numerous bodies of research, specifically the following documents:

[\*The Graduation Effect\*](#) | Alliance for Excellent Education

[\*All of Who I Am: Perspectives from Young People About Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning\*](#) | America's Promise

[\*Don't Call Them Dropouts\*](#) | America's Promise

[\*The Brain Basis for Integrated Social, Emotional, and Academic Development\*](#) | The Aspen Institute

[\*Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Raising High School Graduation Rates\*](#) | Civic & Everyone Graduates Center

[\*Reframing Adolescence and Adolescent Development\*](#) | FrameWorks

This document was also heavily informed by the contributions of partners over the past decade of collaborative efforts to move toward a 90 percent national graduation rate. This work would not be possible without insights from the GradNation co-conveners: the Alliance for Excellent Education, Civic, and the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University.

We'd also like to acknowledge our partner organizations whose staff members participated in various parts of the development and review of this document: City Year; Communities in Schools; Data Quality Campaign; Education Commission of the States; Jobs for Michigan's Graduates; Learning Policy Institute; Minnesota Alliance with Youth; National College Attainment Network; National League of Cities; Proyecto Pastoral; Rochester Children's Institute; Spartanburg Academic Movement; and United Way of Central New Mexico.