



NO. 1 IN THE USA

# A bold move against 'dropout factories'

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## Program keeps close eye on city's at-risk students

By Greg Toppo  
USA TODAY

PHILADELPHIA – The day has barely begun here at Feltonville School of Arts and Sciences, a middle school in the city's northeast corner, and Adam Jackson already is using his cellphone, hoping to get a parent on the other end.

The north Philadelphia native, 22, is an unlikely truant officer in an experiment to get more city kids to graduate from high school.

Moments earlier, as he wandered through the sixth-grade homeroom he's assigned to, Jackson noted that two students were absent. As the group made its way to the first class of the day, he slipped into a quiet courtyard, popped his cellphone from a belt case and traced his finger down a list of phone numbers.

"A lot of kids, they see their older brothers and sisters not in school, and it influences them to run around as well," he says.

For years, educators have tried – often in vain – to get more students to graduate from high school on time and boost college-going rates. But few approaches have had much success: Dropout rates in many cities approach 50%, and a few cities – including Baltimore, Dallas, Detroit, Houston and Philadelphia – graduate fewer than 45% of students. On a school-by-school basis, recent research suggests that about one in eight high schools in the USA – many of them in the nation's biggest cities – are virtual "dropout factories" where fewer than 60% of freshmen graduate within four years.

"Historically, we have never really tried to turn around chronically underperforming schools in this country," U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan told a group of charter school advocates last month. "Instead, we have allowed the status quo to languish in underserved communities, sometimes not just for years, but literally for decades."

But a few educators are now taking a hard look at what happens to kids years before they get to high school, where, as it turns out, red flags appear with alarming regularity.

Here at Feltonville, in a run-down city neighborhood, an unusual bid to stem the tide is turning heads in just its second year. It's one of several that focuses on at-risk kids well before they



By Eileen Blass, USA TODAY

City Year member Ashley Moffett of Lake Charles, La., works with students, in a sixth-grade science class at Feltonville.

get to high school. Dubbed Diplomas Now, it takes a microscope to students as early as the sixth grade in the belief that by the time they're in high school, it's too late to intervene.

Results of the program, piloted here last year, were so impressive that the program has spread to four more cities: Chicago, Los Angeles, New Orleans and San Antonio. The expansion is being funded with a three-year, \$5 million grant from the PepsiCo Foundation.

Jackson punches in the home number of one absent student and stands silently while he waits for someone to pick up.

Finally he introduces himself and, in a soft, deferential voice, says, "I was wondering if Isaiah's going to be in today, or if everything's OK? 'Cause I didn't see him."

Not exactly the typical scolding call from a truant officer. But day after day, calls like that have helped to boost Feltonville's average daily attendance past 92%, a dazzling rate for an inner-city middle school.

Moments later – and armed with a list of 11 chronically absent students – a pair of in-house social workers will climb into a weathered silver Honda Accord and begin driving around the neighborhood, knocking on doors.

**Cover  
story**



Seeking Solutions is an occasional series on city, state and grassroots efforts to solve some of the USA's long-standing societal problems.



By Eileen Blass, USA TODAY

Adam Jackson, 22, of City Year, works with 6th-graders in math class at Feltonville. City Year is part of the Diplomas Now program at the middle school. Diplomas Now takes data that schools are already collecting on kids – attendance, behavior and grades in just a few subjects – and uses it as an “early warning” system to figure out who’s at risk of dropping out.

“Kids have a lot of resilience – they don’t give up right away,” says Johns Hopkins education researcher Robert Balfanz, one of the program’s creators. “But if you struggle all through middle school, by the time you get to high school you’ve been struggling for three years. So your frustration level is very (high). You don’t have a lot of faith in the system or your ability.”

Using data that schools already collect (attendance, behavior and grades in two subjects – English and math), Diplomas Now creates what amounts to an “early warning” spreadsheet to figure out who’s most at risk of dropping out. Poor attendance and bad behavior obviously telegraph that a kid is in trouble, but Balfanz says failing math or English in the sixth grade is just as big of a red flag, because the two subjects are key to everything that follows.

## Before kids fail *everything*

“Kids who fail math or English in sixth grade go on to start failing everything in ninth grade,” he says.

Once it establishes who is at risk, Feltonville brings in “a second shift of adults” to help teachers, including a small cadre of volunteers such as Jackson – some as young as 18 – to tutor and mentor students, tempt them into after-school classes and refer the most troubled kids and their families to social workers for mental health services, counseling and medical care.

The volunteers check on homework and pester kids and their families about attendance. When kids return to school, the volunteers have assembled the work the kids have missed.

In Philadelphia and the other trial cities, Hopkins is working with City Year, an AmeriCorps program that taps recent high school and college graduates, and Communities In Schools, a national dropout-prevention group.

At Feltonville, the school day begins with a gathering in the courtyard, where City Year corps members try to coax kids into dancing, playing games and burning up a bit of energy. The big idea is that giving kids even a small reason to show up will pay off

in better attendance, performance and attitude.

One recent chilly morning, a volunteer has set up a laptop computer with tiny speakers blaring Cupid Shuffle (“Down, down, do your dance/do your dance ...”). Rachele Jean-Baptiste, the program manager, tries to rustle up a group to dance – but no takers.

Soon, two other corps members bring out a length of rope for a limbo game. A smattering of students, most of them boys weighed down with book bags, join in, bending beneath the rope without ever taking their hands out of their pockets.

So far, results at Feltonville are promising: From 2008 to 2009, the percentage of students with poor attendance fell 52%; those with poor behavior fell 45%; and those earning F’s in English fell 80%, and in math 83%.

Though not a cure-all for urban schools, it offers what seems a simple way for educators to focus scant resources on the neediest kids and save time and money on remediation in high school, where many would-be dropouts routinely fail core classes.

The initial research for Diplomas Now comes from a nine-year longitudinal study of 13,000 students, conducted by Balfanz and the non-profit Philadelphia Education Fund. It uncovered the four risk factors.

“Half the kids who drop out are waving their hands in the sixth grade,” he says. “They’re ... saying, ‘Help! If you don’t intervene, a bad thing’s going to happen. I’m disengaged and I’m on the path of dropping out already. I’m 12 years old.’ “

As they drive around northeast Philadelphia, social workers Staci Hardy and Todd Milhollen seem an unlikely pair.

Hardy, 30, African-American and in the driver’s seat, exudes a powerful, quiet calm. She says little and rarely raises her voice. Milhollen, 39 and white, talks animatedly and at length about how their system works – with kids and parents.

“We’re not like truant officers,” he says. “We’re just trying to help them see the bigger picture.”

But if parents don’t cooperate, they can be hauled into the city’s truancy court, where they face fines. In the worst cases, a judge can remove kids and send them to a boarding school in central Pennsylvania. Milhollen says he prefers to avoid that, as the process can take a year.

It soon becomes clear that splintered, scattered families account for much of the absentee problem at Feltonville. At the home of one eighth-grader who has missed 28 days, his mother calls the boy’s father, who says he sent the boy off to school – maybe he just took the long way getting there. Milhollen makes a note to follow up.

At another house, a mother says, through the crack of the doorway, that her son has had to get medical tests and has only been able to get appointments during school hours.

Before he knocks on the door at a third house, Milhollen bums a few dollars off Hardy to give a kid money for a bus ticket.

At another house, there’s no answer, so Hardy opens the mailbox and pops in a pink flyer that urges parents to get



their kids to school. This summer, they'll visit churches and community groups "to get them on board more so," Milhollen says.

## A 'conveyor belt' of support

The pair began their morning visits in March, and they've developed a reputation for their tenacity. That afternoon, an administrator jokes that families are moving so that Hardy and Milhollen can't find them.

Balfanz made news – and a few enemies – in 2007, after coining the term "dropout factories." He was talking about the 1,700 high schools in which no more than 60% of freshmen make it to senior year.

It's a vivid image and, for an educator who believes in the power of social services, a provocative one. It recognizes the toll that poverty takes in kids' lives, but also puts much of the burden onto schools, not the larger society.

President Obama has championed programs such as New York City's Harlem Children's Zone, which surrounds poor families with services in what its creator calls a "conveyor belt" of support.

Balfanz says there's no doubt that such programs have great promise. "That's ultimately how you beat back poverty – but in the meantime, I'm moving some of those supports into the school, because that's the one functioning institution in many of these communities."

At up to \$500,000 a school, Diplomas Now is expensive, but Balfanz says it focuses on just the kids who will end up at the nation's neediest high schools.

The program can be paid for with federal Title I money for low-income students, who are most at risk of dropping out. And, he says, it's flexible enough to be adopted by educational, charitable and social services agencies in most any city.

## The 'intensity you need'

"This is the kind of intensity you need to turn around the toughest schools," he says.

One thing at Feltonville is unmistakable: There are a lot of adults in the building. In one sixth-grade English class on a recent morning, there's teacher Kim Somahkawahho, her City

Year corps member Ashley Moffett, a special-education aide and another volunteer.

Though she's only 23, with no teaching experience, Moffett acts as a second pair of eyes and ears, with an ability to connect to kids much as an older sister might.

"They tell her things they won't tell me," says Somahkawahho, 46. Because Moffett follows the students through much of the day, she can intervene in disputes, as she did recently when a sixth-grade boy was accused of threatening a female classmate.

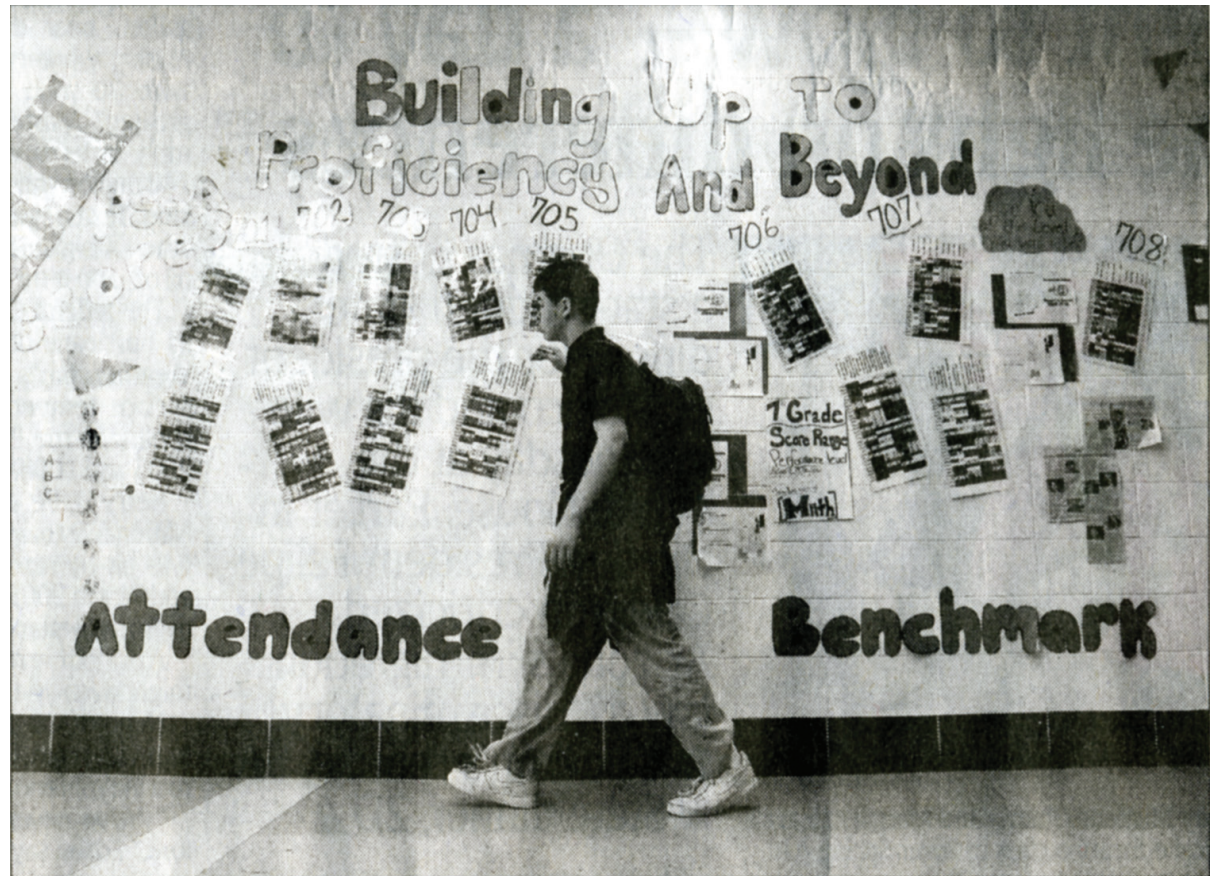
The boy eventually admitted the threat and apologized, she says. "It did not turn into a fight with a bunch of people getting involved."

Zabrina Aponte, a mother of six whose 13-year-old son, Odalis, is in Somahkawahho's class, says Moffett has figured out how to get the students to respect her. "I've seen these kids," says Aponte. "Even the worst of them, they're like, 'Yes, Miss.'"

Moffett earned Odalis' trust last November after she worked patiently with the boy and helped him score 95% on a math test – after years of poor grades.

Math has always been his toughest subject, Aponte says, and this year Moffett has quietly, persistently urged Odalis on, even when he was sick of math.

"When she sees him falling off, she'll come over and tap him on the shoulder and say, 'Come on.' As a working mother, I appreciate that there's another person rooting for my child, pulling for my child."



**Benchmarks for success:** A student walks past a wall showing student proficiency at Feltonville. The school is part of the Diplomas Now program, which helps students get back on track to graduation.