

# Keeping Secondary Students on the Graduation Path

Education Commission of the States July 2009

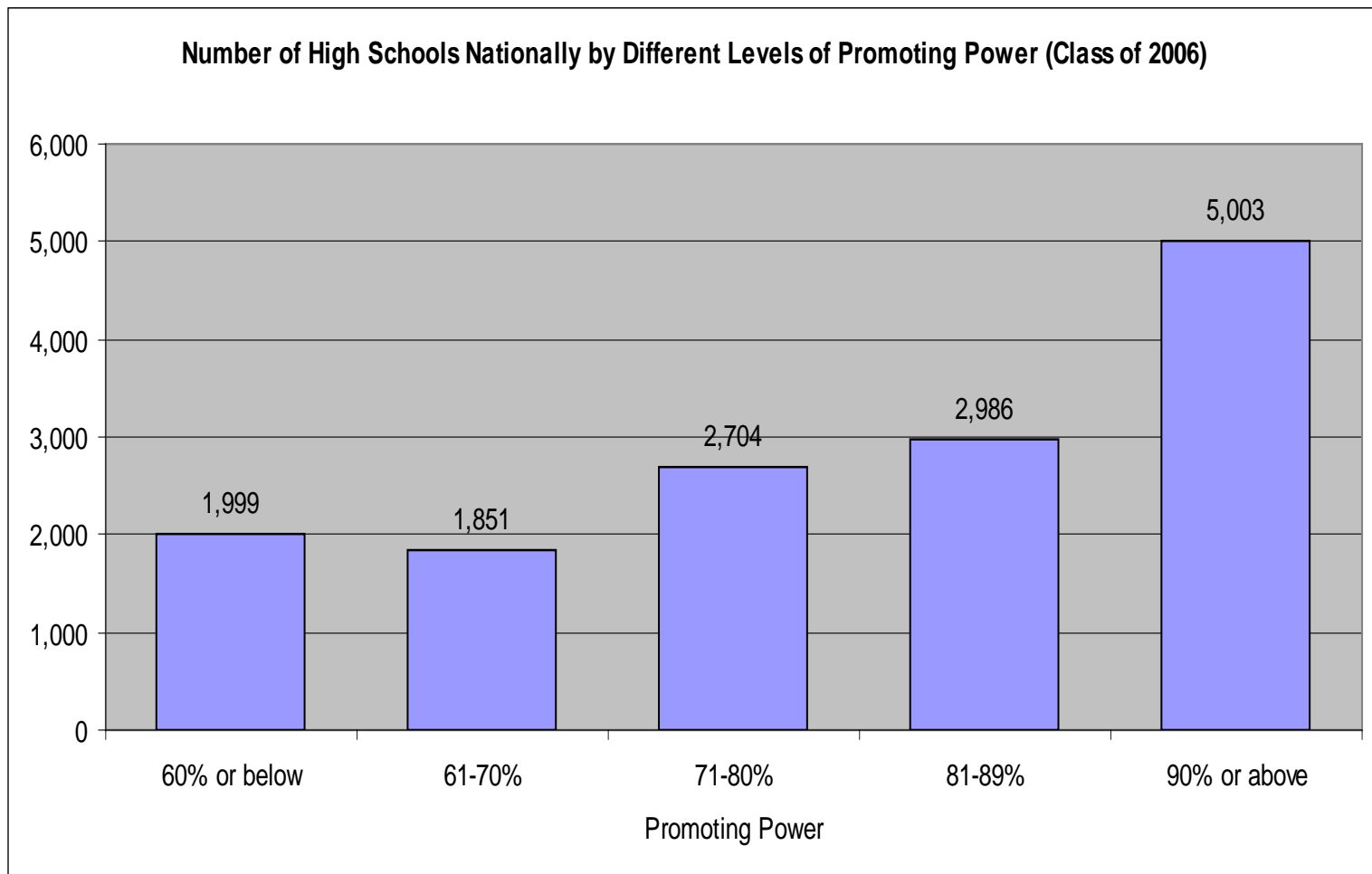
Robert Balfanz  
Everyone Graduates Center  
Center for Social Organization of Schools  
Johns Hopkins Univ.

President Obama has  
challenged the nation to  
eliminate dropping out  
as an option.

How Then Does the Dropout  
Crisis End?

**We Know Where the Problem is  
Concentrated**

# The Nation's Dropout Crisis is Concentrated in 15% of its High Schools in Which Every Year Less than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of Students Fail to Graduate



# We know where the Nation's Low Graduation Rate High Schools are Located

- About Half are Located in the Nation's Cities
- The Other Half are Located throughout the South and Southwest-rural low wealth counties and urban fringe
- Every State has one
- 25% are in Single High School-School Districts

We have insight into why  
these High Schools have  
Low Graduation Rates

# We observed dropping out to be a mechanical-like process in these High Schools

- ❖ Students Enter High School with Below Grade Level Skills and/or Poor Attendance Habits or struggle with the transition to high school
- ❖ 50% or more of students may miss 20 or more days of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, up to a third may miss 10 of the first 30 days
- ❖ The near majority fail two or more and some fail Nearly All of their 1<sup>st</sup> Semester Courses.
- ❖ One quarter to one half Do Not Earn Enough Credits to be Promoted to the 10<sup>th</sup> Grade
- ❖ They Repeat 9<sup>th</sup> Grade and Fail Again
- ❖ They become over-age for grade with few credits and see little chance of succeeding. They dropout, perhaps after a brief transfer to another school

# In the Main these High Schools are Over-Challenged and Under-Resourced for the Degree of Educational Difficulty that they Face

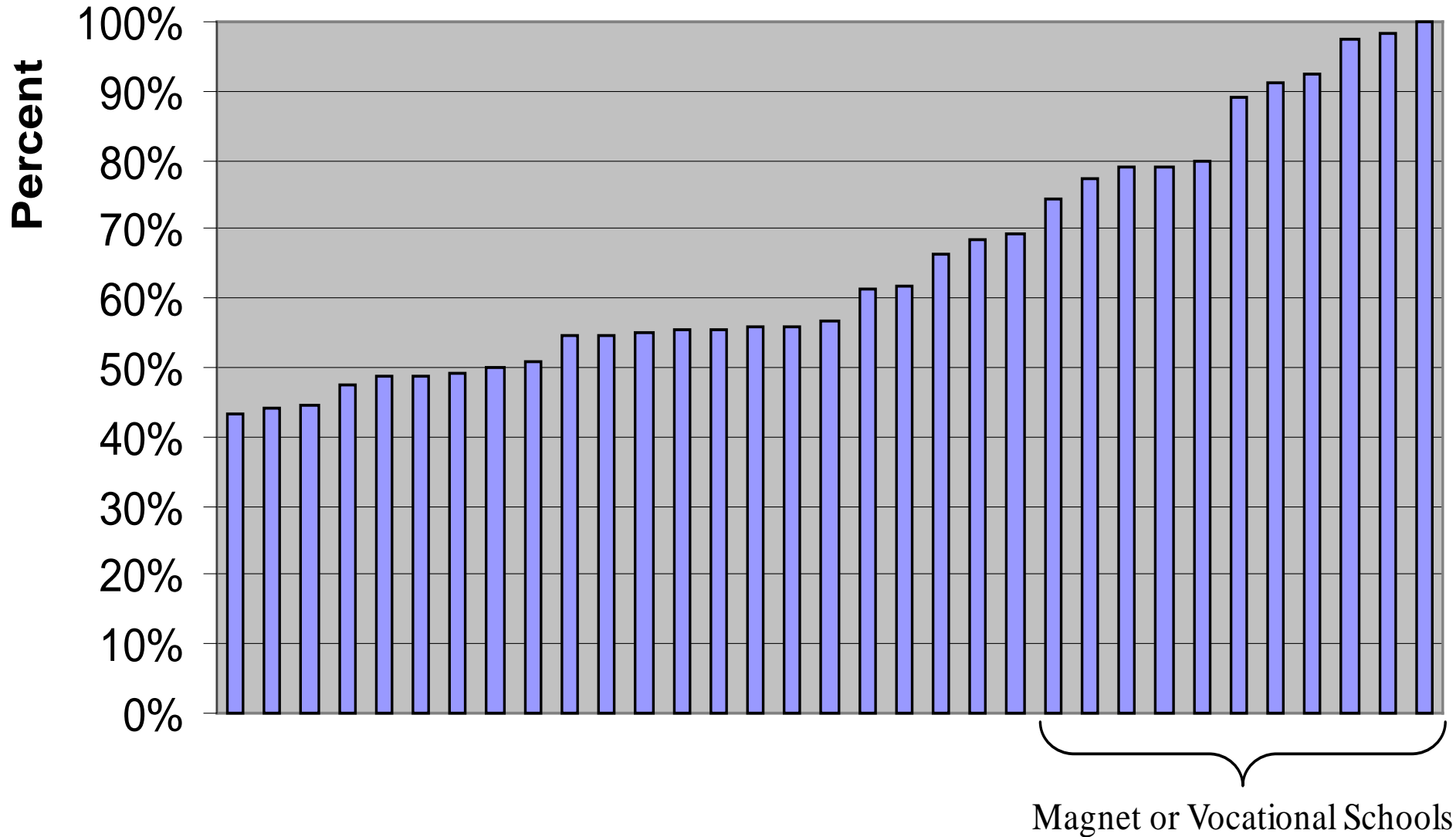
## Philadelphia Case Study:

The Educational Challenge of the Ninth Grade-  
High Poverty Neighborhood High Schools

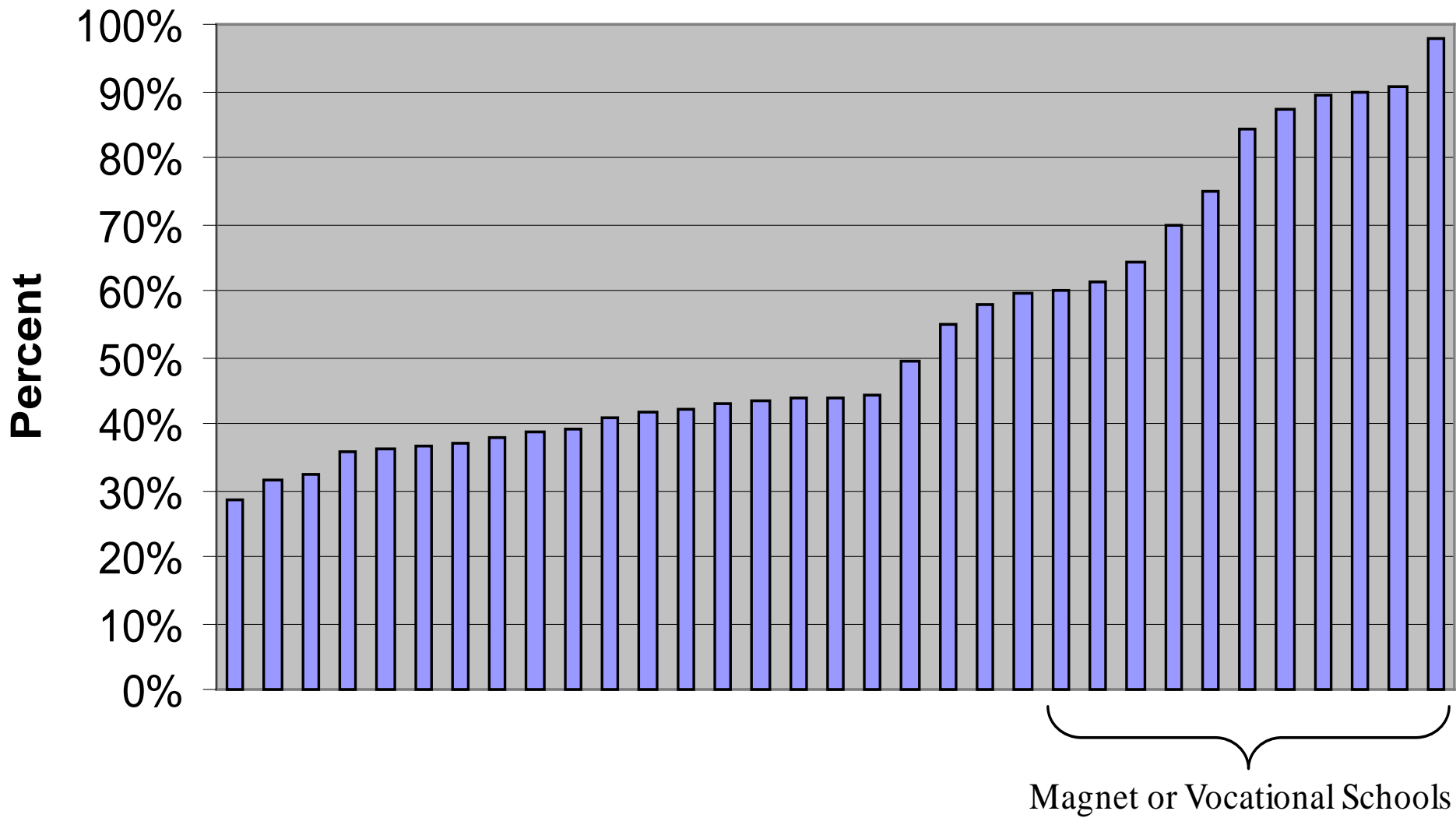
vs.

Selective Admission Magnets

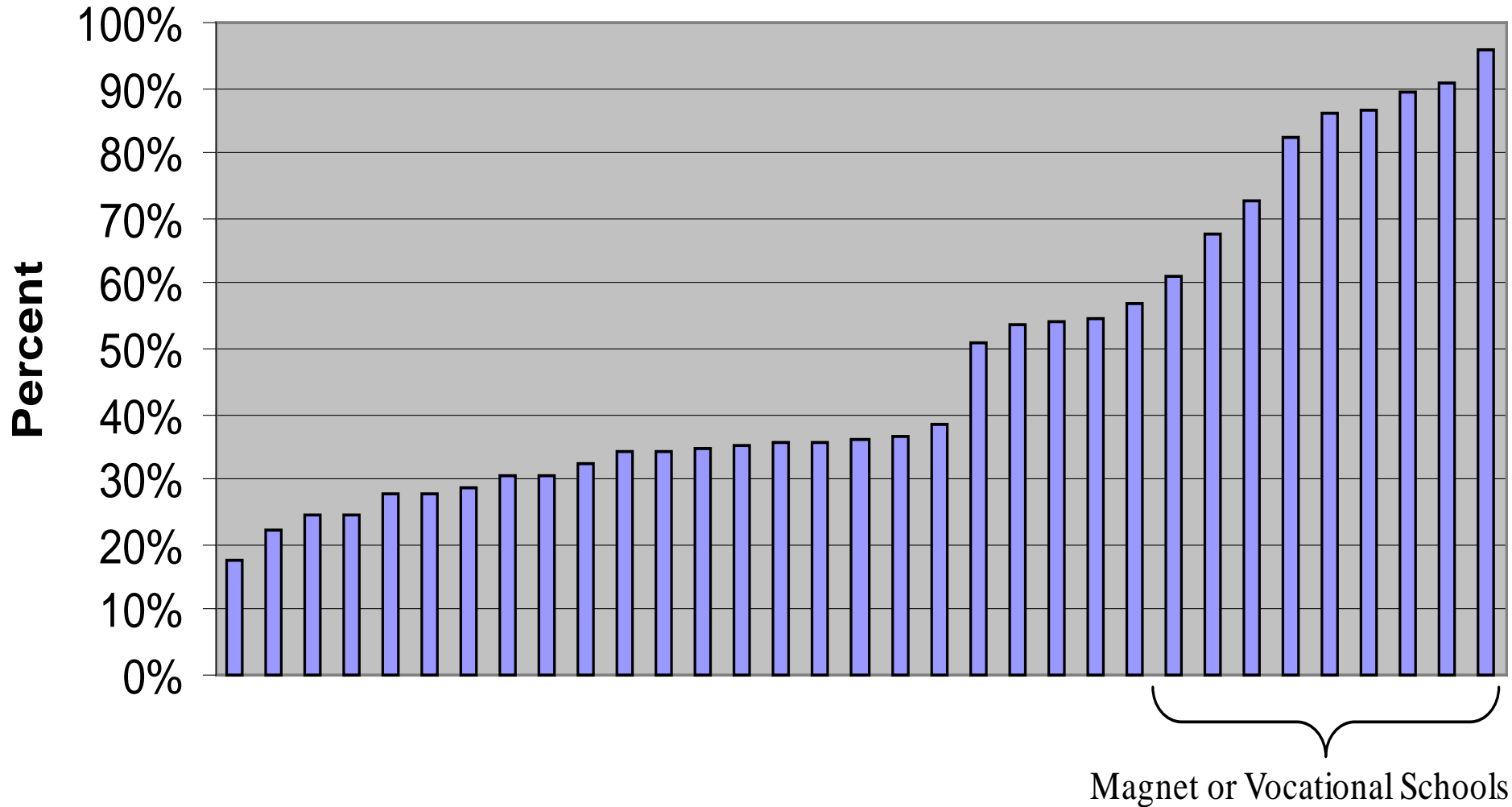
# Percentages of 9th Graders who are First-Time Freshmen by High School



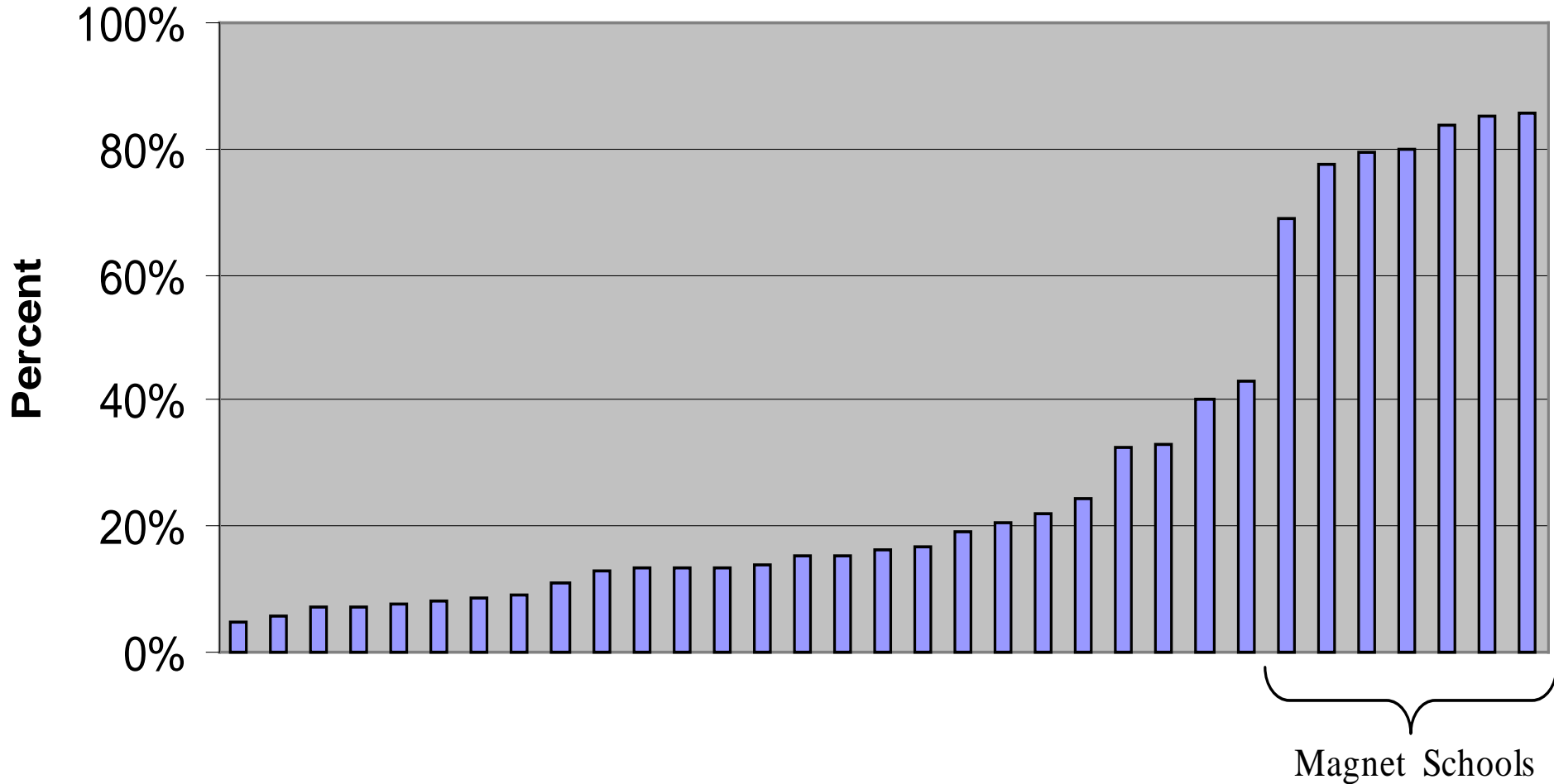
# Percentage of 9th Graders who are On-Age, First-Time Freshmen by High School



# Percentage of 9th Graders who are On-Age, First Time Freshmen with 80%+ Attendance in 8th Grade by High School



# Percentage of 9th Graders who are On-Age, First Time Freshmen with 80%+ Attendance in 8th Grade and Math and Reading Skills at the 7th Grade Level or Higher by High School



# Under-Resourced

- Although they educate almost exclusively low income students less than half the nation's low graduate rate high schools receive federal Title 1 funds.
- In the main, they receive no enhanced staffing models to meet their high level of educational challenge.
- District's increase high school class size to pay for elementary class size reduction
- Students sometimes must make do with class sets of textbooks
- Latino students in particular attend large weak promoting power high schools with high teacher student ratios.
- The 9<sup>th</sup> grade in a non-selective, high poverty, low performing high school is not generally viewed as a good place to teach, so has higher share of vacancies, long term subs, inexperienced teachers, teacher mobility and absence.

# We Know Why Most Students Dropout of School

# There are 4 Main Types of Dropouts

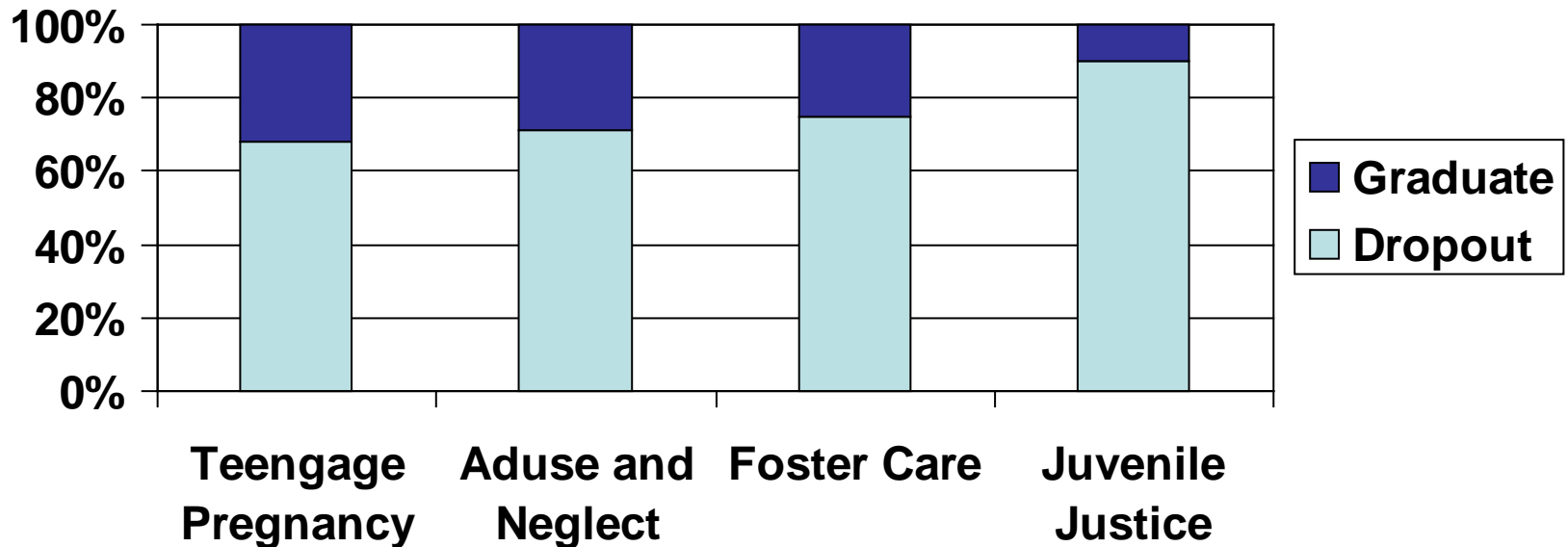
- Life events (forces outside of school cause students to dropout)
- Fade Outs (students do ok in school but stop seeing a reason for staying)
- Push Outs (students who are or perceived to be detrimental to others in the school)
- Failing in School, Schools Failing the Student

# Life Events

- Often Have Very Low Graduation Rates
- Do Not Typically Constitute the Majority of Dropouts
- Need Second Chance Opportunities and enhanced social supports to overcome life event

# Currently in Large Cities the Social Safety Net is Not Working

## Dropout and Graduation Rates for Philadelphia Students Involved with Social Service Agencies- Class of 2000



# Fade Outs

- Not easy to predict but don't constitute the majority of dropouts
- Sometimes leave as late as the 12<sup>th</sup> grade only a few credits shy of graduation
- Often regret dropping out, soon after they do. Many call it the worst decision of their life.
- Substantial numbers try to re-enter educational system
- Often need Rapid Credit acquisition opportunities linked with work opportunities

# Push Outs

- Numbers vary by place and time
- Often dependent on disposition and effort of Assistant Principals
- In most respects are failing to succeed students who are given a shove

# Failing to Succeed in School

- In high poverty environments typically constitute the majority of dropouts
- Are Easily Identifiable Using Data Routinely Collected by Schools
- Can be Identified at Key Junctures of Secondary School When Their Odds for Success are About to Take a Turn for the Worse
- Often Persist in School for a Long Time before Dropping Out, Despite Years of Struggles

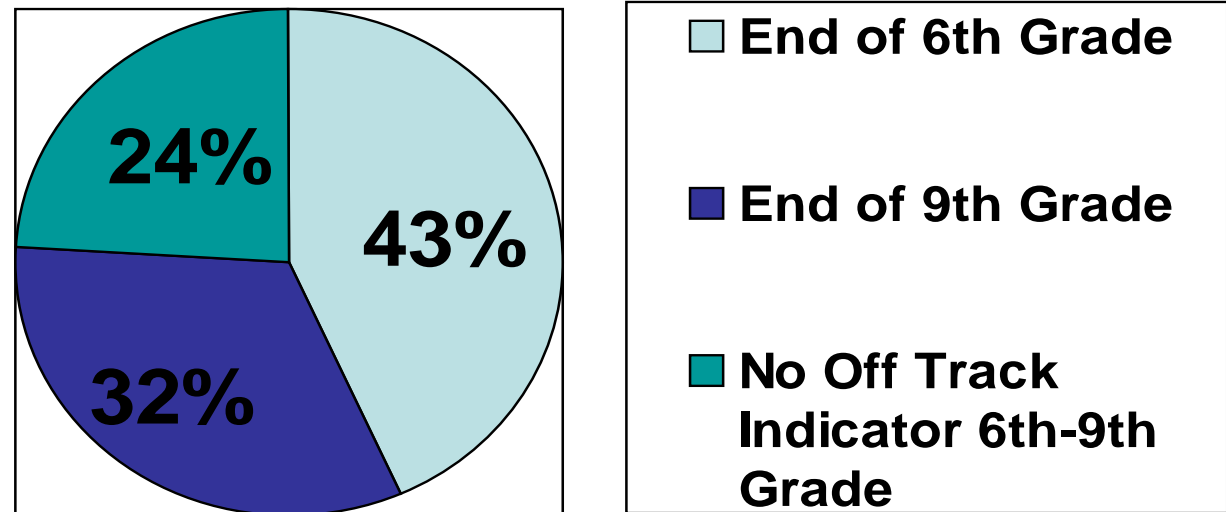
As a Result  
We Know Which Students  
(Absent Sustained Intervention)  
Will Not Graduate

# Major Finding

- Students in high poverty school districts who successfully navigate grades 6 to 10 on time and on track, by and large, graduate from high school (75% or higher grad rates)
- Students in high poverty school districts who struggle and become disengaged in the early secondary grades and in particular have an unsuccessful 6<sup>th</sup> and/or 9<sup>th</sup> grade transition do not graduate (20% or less grad rates)

# In High Poverty School Districts, 75% of Eventual Dropouts Can be Identified between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Grade

**Percent of Dropouts That Can Be Identified between the 6th and 9th grade-Boston Class of 2003**



We Know  
the Warning Signs  
to Look For

# Students are Knocked Off Course in the Early Secondary Grade by the A,B, C's

**Attendance**

**Behavior**

**Course Failure**

# Attendance

- Across multiple school districts the critical threshold varied from attending school less than 80% of the time to attending less than 90% of the time
- This indicates that the critical factor may not be total days missed but being in the bottom of the attendance distribution

# Behavior

- Out of School Suspensions were highly predictive
- But so was sustained mild miss-behavior e.g. not completing assignments, not paying attention, acting out in class etc.
- Many more students received poor final behavior grades for mild-misbehavior than were suspended 1000's compared to 100's.

# Course Failure

- Student who fail mathematics, English or any two courses in 6<sup>th</sup> -9<sup>th</sup> grade are in trouble
- In 6<sup>th</sup> grade few students failed both math and English. In 9<sup>th</sup> grade many students fail math and English
- 85% of 6<sup>th</sup> graders who failed English and 75% of those who failed Math in Philadelphia also received a poor final behavior mark and/or attended less than 80% of the time
- Course Failure is a Better Predictor of Graduation Outcomes than Test Scores
- Some students do fine in 6-8<sup>th</sup> grade but fall off track in 9<sup>th</sup> grade

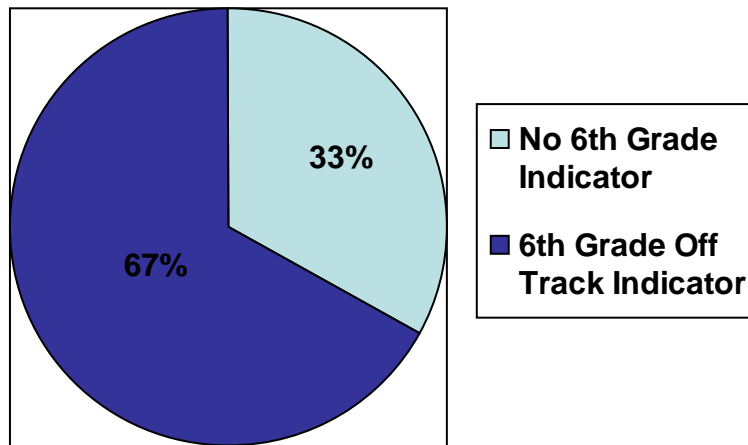
# It's Student Behaviors in the Early Secondary Grades in High Poverty Environments *not* Student Characteristics Which Have Predictive Power

- When we control for attendance, behavior, and course performance being over-age, in special education, ELL or any demographic characteristic (i.e. race and gender) are not significant or effective predictors

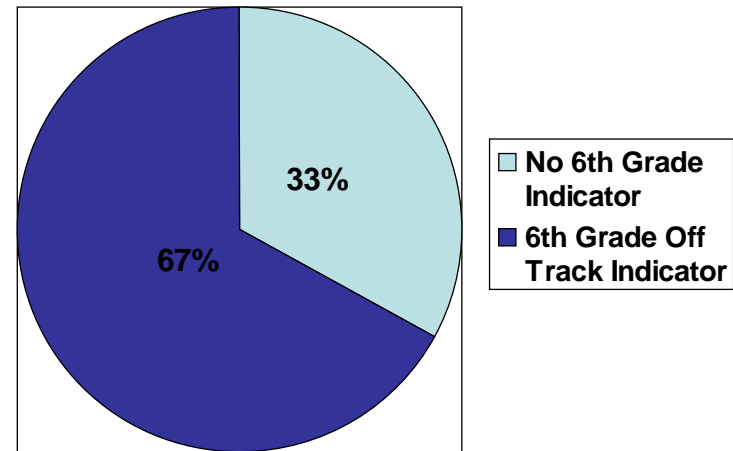
We Know  
The Cost of Inaction  
is High

# School Disengagement Precedes Involvement with the Juvenile Justice System and Teenage Pregnancy

**Males Incarcerated in High School-Philadelphia**



**Females Who Give Birth in High School-Philadelphia**



# What Can be Done? In Practice

# Effective Interventions and Proven Models Exist

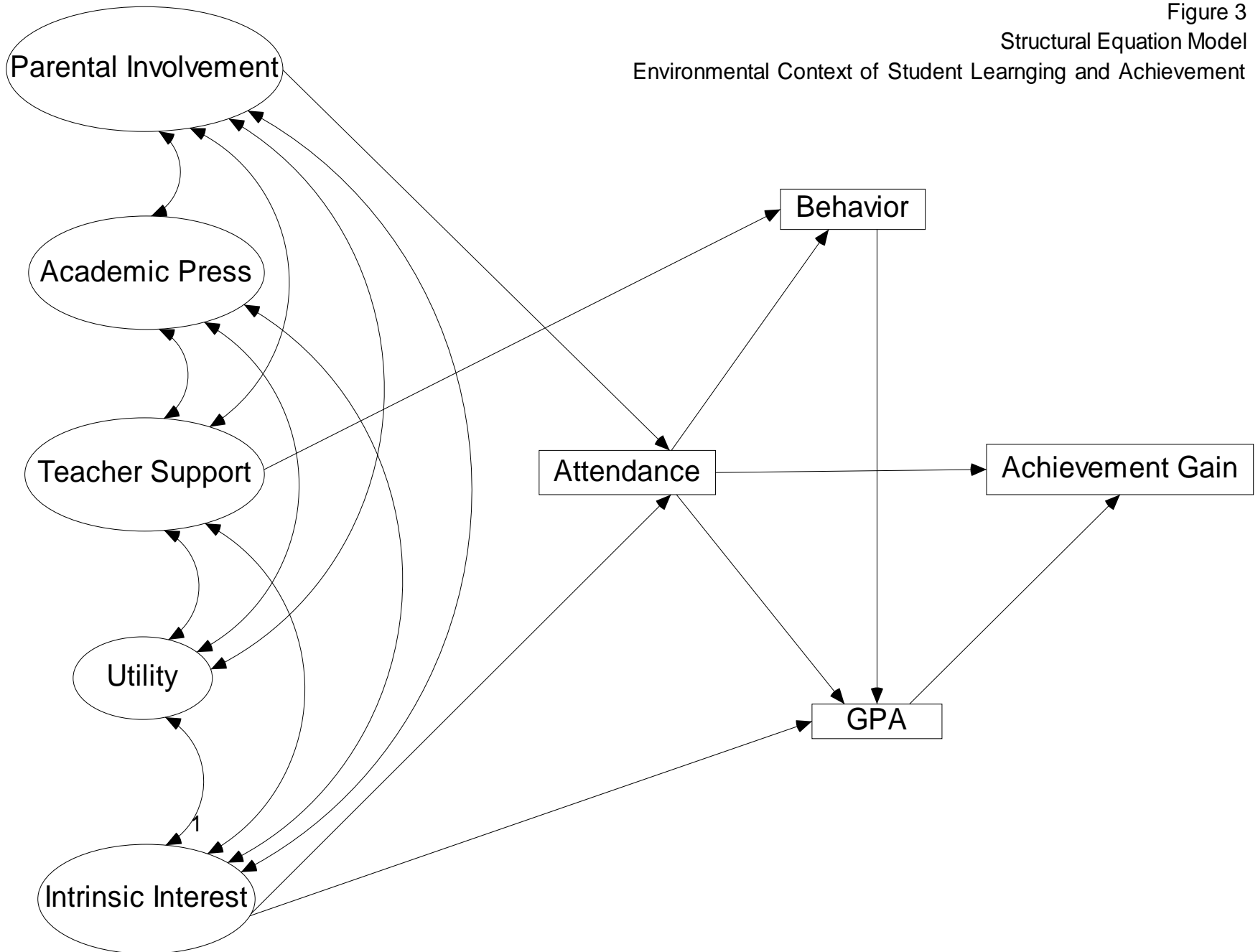
What we face is the giant  
engineering challenge of getting  
the right interventions  
to the right students  
at the right time  
with the required intensity

Three Steps towards  
achieving this-

# Step 1-Comprehensive, Systematic and Sustained Whole School Reforms Which Address Attendance, Behavior, and Course Performance

- Limited reforms or partial implementation will lead to limited or partial success

Figure 3  
Structural Equation Model  
Environmental Context of Student Learning and Achievement



# At Each Transition Point Consider Both Academic and Social Needs

- Middle Grades-Intermediate Academic Skills (reading comprehension and fluency, transition from arithmetic to mathematics) and a need for adventure and camaraderie
- High School-Transition to Adult Behaviors and Mind Set and a path to college and career readiness, as well as the right extra help for students with below grade level skills

# Step 2-Link Early Warning Systems to Tiered Interventions

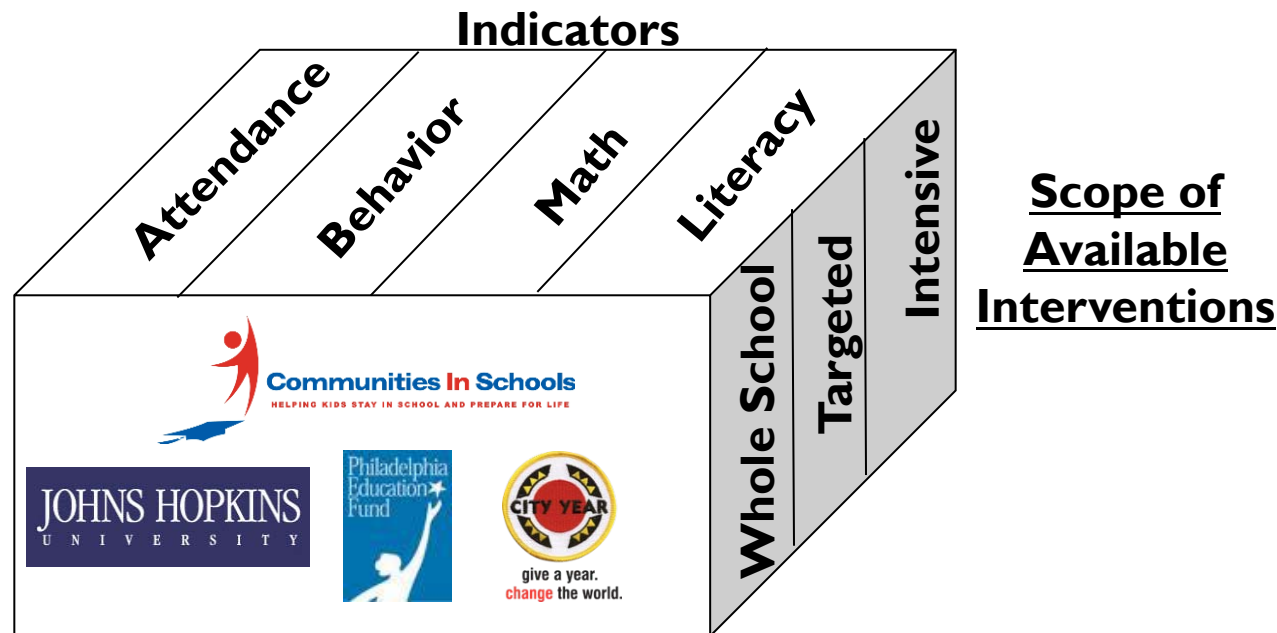
- Focus on effective intervention, not just identification
- Need to be able to respond to the first signs that a student is falling off track
- Systematically apply school-wide preventative, targeted and the intensive interventions until students is on-track
- Recognize and build on student strengths
- Provide time, training, and support to teachers
- Match resources to student needs but practice intervention discipline
- Evaluate the effectiveness of interventions
- Remember you can get started with the data in your school

# Keeping Early Secondary Students on Track to Graduation (Grades 6-10)

	<b>Examples of Academic Interventions</b>	<b>Examples of Behavioral/Attendance Interventions</b>
<b>Whole School Preventative</b>	<p>Research and Standards Based Core Curriculum</p> <p>Extended Time Math and Literacy Blocks</p> <p>Benchmark Assessments</p>	<p><b>Positive Behavior Supports</b></p> <p><b>Attendance Campaigns (first absence brings a response/social incentives)</b></p> <p><b>Hands On/Minds On Courses (Music, Art, Science, Debate, Sports)</b></p>
<b>Targeted</b>	<p>Reduced Class Size</p> <p>Elective Replacement</p> <p>Extra Help Courses</p> <p>Linked to Core Course</p>	<p><b>Behavior/Attendance Team-Problem Solving, Contracts and Daily Monitoring</b></p> <p><b>Mentoring</b></p>
<b>Intensive</b>	Tutoring	Social Service Supports

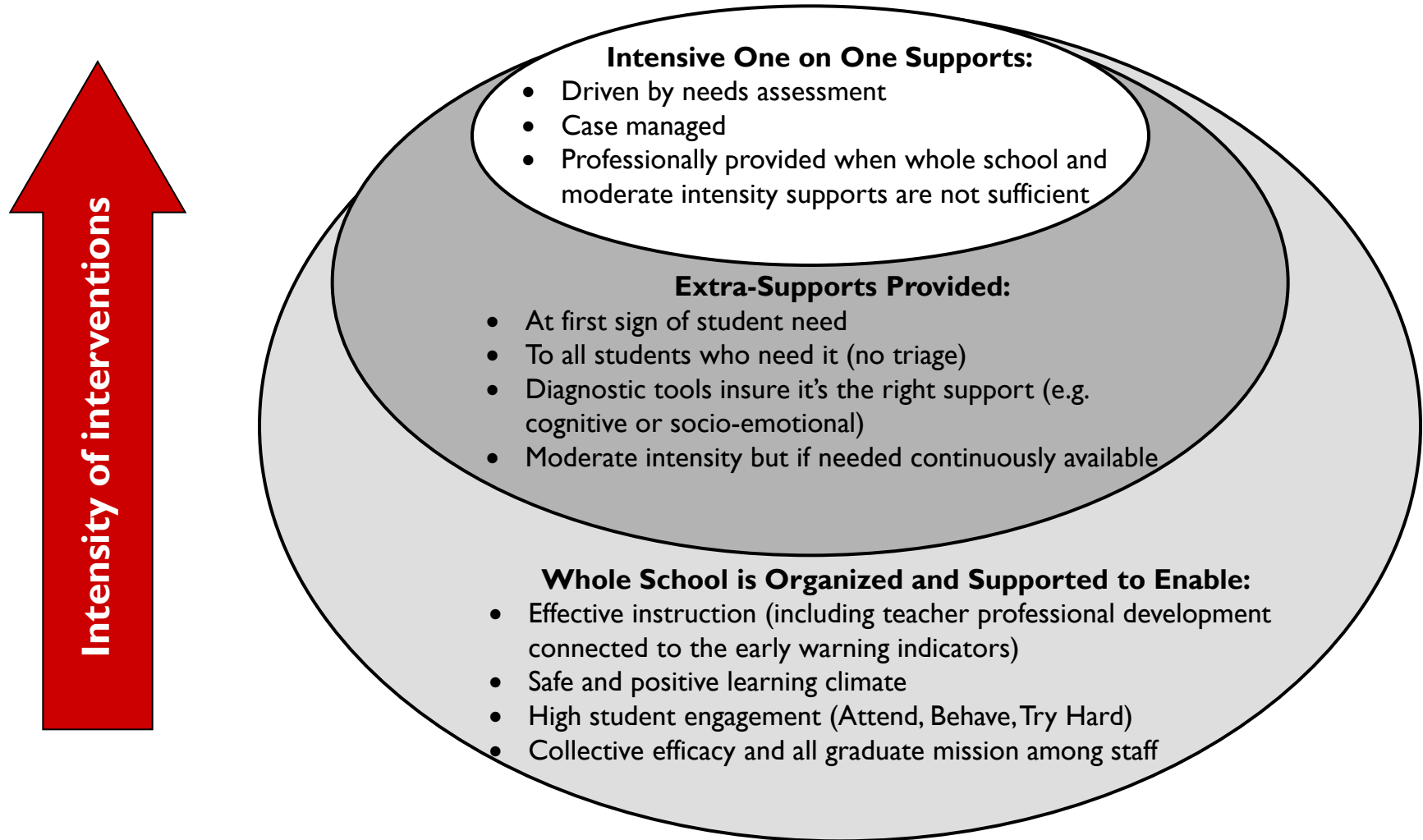
# Diplomas Now is designed for the middle and high schools with the greatest number of “off-track” students

1. Combine **whole school reform**, **national service** and **integrated student supports** with an **early warning indicator system** and **on-site coordination** to provide a full school tiered system for supporting all students.
2. Continuous monitoring of student performance related to key early warning indicators
3. Identification of students who are veering off track by indicator
4. Provide the appropriate interventions



# Diplomas Now School Design

*Providing the Right Support to the Right Student at the Right Time*



# Challenges We Need to Overcome

- Getting the ratio of skilled adults to students in need right
- Getting teacher buy-in and support for the Mission of Keeping Secondary Students on the Graduation Path
- Strengthening the Parent, Student, Teacher Support Triangle

# Step 3-Involve the Community

- Community specific data analysis to establish how many students dropout, when and why to enable reforms to be targeted at the right students at the right scale and intensity
- 
- A community compact-multi-year plan to end the dropout crisis
- Community can provide program managers not just incentives
- Work with social service providers to coordinate efforts and make the case for investing social service dollars in school prevention efforts.

# What Can be Done? In Policy

- Need to integrate all youth development efforts towards keeping students on the graduation path college and career ready
- Need to make sure that sufficient resources-human, social, and financial are available to provide the scale of student reports required
- Need to make data-based decisions on resource allocation-need to take degree of educational difficulty into account-number and concentration of students in need of which supports

# How Does the Dropout Crisis End?

- Transform (fix or replace) the 2,000 Low Graduation Rate High Schools and Their Feeder Middle Grade Schools
- Implement Early Warning and Intervention Systems-and have a sufficient ratio of skilled and committed adults to students in need
- Put the Right Recovery options in place
- Adopt Policies which promote graduation for all

# The State Role

- Insist on and support high quality needs and capacity assessments of low grad rate high schools and their feeder middle schools
- Insist on and support wise selection of school transformation strategies-one size does not fit all
- Develop, train, and support integrated state, district, school transformation teams
- Build District Early Warning Systems-combined centralized state data, with ability to input local data, develop ability to help districts upgrade existing system, provide funding for teacher training
- Conduct state level policy audits

For more information visit the  
Everyone Graduates Center at  
[www.every1graduates.org](http://www.every1graduates.org)

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