To: Our Colleagues

From: Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor

Re: ADDRESSING THE DROPOUT PROBLEM INVOLVES MORE THAN WHAT POLICY MAKERS ARE PROPOSING

In a March 1st speech, President Obama challenged states to identify high schools with graduation rates below 60%.

“It is time for all of us, no matter what our backgrounds, to come together and solve this epidemic. Stemming the tide of dropouts will require turning around our low-performing schools. Just 2,000 high schools in cities like Detroit, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia produce over 50% of America’s dropouts…… Let us all make turning around our schools our collective responsibility as Americans.”

“This is a problem we can’t afford to accept or ignore,” President Obama said. “The stakes are too high — for our children, for our economy, for our country. It’s time for all of us to come together — parents and students, principals and teachers, business leaders and elected officials — to end America’s dropout crisis.”

There is no issue about it being time for all of us to come together.

But just identifying high schools with poor graduation rates and applying one of the four school improvement reform models certainly is no more than a first and insufficient step, and one that will likely have some undesired consequences and that clearly doesn’t provide a significant focus on bringing school and community stakeholders together. And, it is unclear how new investments in dropout prevention and recovery strategies will fit into a school’s efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students.

The Obama Administration has committed $3.5 billion to fund transformational changes in America’s persistently low-performing schools and the President’s FY 2011 budget includes $900 million to support School Turnaround Grants. In addition, the President has “emphasized the importance of investing in dropout prevention and recovery strategies to help make learning more engaging and relevant for students, and announced new efforts to invest $100 million in a College Pathways program to promote a college readiness culture in high schools, through programs that allow students to earn a high school diploma and college credit at the same time” (as reported in the New York Times).

From a policy and practice perspective, the problem is that federal, state, and local policy are not aligned around intervention and operational infrastructure frameworks that directly focus on weaving school and community resources together to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. How will this change?

The renewed focus on increasing graduation rates provides an opportunity. But, only if policy makers work more directly on how to bring stakeholders together to develop the type of comprehensive intervention system needed to improve K-12 in ways that reduce dropouts and improve readiness for postsecondary education. How can the focus on dropouts be used to move school and community stakeholders beyond a limited understanding of what is involved in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.
(Much more is involved here than calling for community schools and coordinating services.) It requires moving policy and practice for improving schools and increasing graduate rates from the currently prevailing two component school reform model to a three-component framework.

Thus, if schools are to increase graduation rates, they need school improvement guidelines that go well beyond those currently in use.

And, all this has major implications for the ESEA reauthorization.

Let us know what your reactions are to the policy proposals related to the dropout problem.

For our Center’s policy and practice analyses related to all this, see:

>Toward Next Steps in School Improvement: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching –
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/systemic/towardnextstep.pdf

For a more indepth discussion of matters related to increasing graduation rates, see

>Interventions to Support Readiness, Recruitment, Access, Transition, and Retention for Postsecondary Education Success: An Equity of Opportunity Policy and Practice Analysis
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/postsecondary.pdf

Brief abstract: Recognition is growing about the public health and civil rights imperative for reducing the high rate of school dropouts. However, too little policy attention is paid to enhancing equity of opportunity for those transitioning from adolescence to young adulthood by increasing enrollment and success in postsecondary education. This new report extends to postsecondary education previous policy and practice analyses from the Center at UCLA focused on reducing dropouts, increasing graduation rates, and closing the achievement gap. Given concerns about diversity and the degree to which some subgroups are underrepresented in postsecondary education, the report stresses that it is essential to use the lenses of equity of opportunity and social justice in rethinking postsecondary education policies and practices. Using these lenses, the report focuses on interventions for improving K-12 in ways that reduce dropouts and improve readiness for postsecondary education, programs for bolstering recruitment and access, and efforts to facilitate transition and retention; recommendations for a shift in policy to enhance equity of opportunity are offered. The work is particularly timely given the increasing calls for enhancing enrollment in and completion of postsecondary education programs and for ensuring inclusion of more and more students from subgroups that have been underrepresented for too long.