



Building a Grad Nation Summit Invigorates and Equips Attendees to Move Forward in Dropout Prevention Efforts

March 25, 2011

The First Annual Building a Grad Nation Summit convened March 21-23 in the nation's capital bringing together nearly 900 education stakeholders to discuss solutions to the challenging high school dropout crisis in America. As part of America's Promise Alliance's 10-year Grad Nation campaign to mobilize Americans to end the dropout crisis, this annual event was co-hosted by the



Alliance, Civic Enterprises, Johns Hopkins University's Everyone Graduates Center and the Alliance for Excellent Education. In addition to a notable lineup of speakers from the Administration, public and private sector and youth, several new research reports were released. Plenary sessions were webcast live online and archived video is now available.

"Our nation finds itself at a critical threshold in our work to improve education and life outcomes for our young people and this summit is crucial to maintain national focus on our education crisis," said Marguerite Kondracke, president and CEO, America's Promise Alliance. "More than one million young people drop out of high school every year, two thirds of those who *do* graduate are not prepared for entry-level college courses in English, math, and science and only 12 percent of minority youth graduate from college. We must accelerate the progress we're seeing to save our young people and our nation's future."



A primary theme of the summit was that of real progress being made, but a reminder that the nation still faces the large challenge of raising graduation rates significantly

across the nation and preparing young people for post-secondary and career success.

“Your presence here means a lot. It reflects the kind of commitment that will be needed all across this nation if we are going to reach our goal of a 90 percent graduation rate by 2020,” said Alma Powell, chair, America’s Promise Alliance. “As awareness has turned to action, we have begun to see the national graduation rates begin to rise. The number of low performing schools is falling. You are really making a difference. But we have to continue to build on that progress.”

Summit kickoff highlighted by Arne Duncan and State Farm’s 26 Seconds initiative

The Summit kicked off on the evening of March 21 with a welcome reception that featured U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan who applauded the group and challenged them to continue collaborating on the road to mending the U.S. public education system.

“We have to turn around our chronically low performing schools,” said Duncan. “We’ve seen a huge amount of change recently, but the fact of the matter is we have a disproportionate number of high school dropouts coming a small percentage of schools. School districts can’t do this by themselves. It has to involve the entire community. All of us have to come together to support this work.”



Duncan shared his experiences, visiting turnaround schools across the country, noting that the work to transform schools is hard, and sometimes controversial, but as he noted, some of the most important work the country can be engaged in.

“We have to continue to challenge the status quo,” said Duncan. “We have to work with an extraordinary sense of urgency. We cannot wait. We all have to move outside our comfort zone. We all have to behave in very different ways. But by coming together on behalf of the children, who need the most help in this country, we can transform their lives, we can transform the lives of their communities, and we can transform their families’ lives for generations to come.”

During the reception, State Farm, the Grad Nation presenting sponsor, unveiled its new dropout prevention public awareness campaign titled “26 Seconds” featuring NBA star LeBron James. The campaign focuses strongly on the voices of young people and includes public service announcements

and online information at 26seconds.com. The State Farm Companies Foundation also announced a college scholarship program for 26 students.



“Since we began our dropout prevention work three years ago, State Farm has been with us every step of the way, and leading the way for others to follow,” said Michael Powell, America’s Promise Alliance board member and co-chair, Grad Nation. “They not only are a great partner, but great role model for the business community. They

understand that preparing our young people for success in the future is not just philanthropy, but an investment that ultimately is good for our country.”

Morning Session highlighted by Vice President Biden’s address

The opening session on March 22 included remarks by Governor Jeb Bush, former Governor of Florida and president, Foundation for Excellent in Education; Patrick Corvington, CEO, Corporation for National and Community Service; Melody Barnes, director, White House Domestic Policy Council; and finally, showcased a visit from Vice President Joe Biden.

“If we were being honest with ourselves today, we would admit that one third of our students graduate from high school ready for a career or college,” said Governor Bush in the opening session. “An additional one third graduate with a diploma, but have to take remedial courses, if they go to college at all. And sadly, one third of our young people don’t graduate from high school at all. To me this is shameful.”

“Transforming our education system should be a national priority and it will only become one if everyone is involved – more volunteers in schools, more community and faith-based groups actively engaged, more business involvement, more mentors, and of course, much more parental involvement,” Governor Bush continued.



Vice President Biden announced the Department of Education’s new College Completion Toolkit which includes information on seven low-cost or no-cost strategies that states can implement to increase the proportion of U.S. college graduates to the largest in the world by 2020.

“I don’t have to tell anyone in this room that a high school diploma is no longer a ticket to the middle class,” said Vice President Biden. “As a matter of fact, I’d argue that without a high school diploma, it’s pretty much a dead end for an awful lot of young women and men in America.”

Biden also shared an adage he remembers he heard his mother say many times: “Children tend to become that what you expect of them.” He continued, “We should expect more, but deliver more, as you are fighting to do – to get high school curricula to the point that people are literally equipped to graduate.”

Update of Building a Grad Nation report



An update to the November 2010 report *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic* authored by Civic Enterprises and the Everyone Graduates Center, was released during the Summit’s first plenary session on March 22. The

report update shows that the number of dropout factories—those schools graduating 60 percent or less of students on time—continued to decline between 2008 and 2009. In addition to the new data on low performing high schools, two reports on using data to drive change in education and a new survey featuring the perspectives of business leaders and college and university presidents on the “skills gap” were unveiled: *Across the Great Divide: Perspectives of CEOs and College Presidents on America’s Higher Education and Skills Gap* and *Education as a Data-Driven Enterprises: A Primer for Leaders in Business, Philanthropy, and Education*.

"After years of gloomy reports, many states and school districts are beating the odds and boosting high school graduation rates by rising to a standard of excellence," said John Bridgeland, CEO of Civic Enterprises.

Wide selection of session topics ranged from the role of policy makers, school transformation and the education of military children

The role of elected officials and policy makers in helping students stay in school and succeed was highlighted throughout the Summit beginning with opening session remarks from the White House Director of Domestic Policy Melody Barnes and former Governor Jeb Bush. Attendees also heard from a bi-partisan panel of state and local leaders including: Govs. Martin O'Malley (D-Md.) and Robert F. McDonnell (R-Va.); Mayor Gregory A. Ballard (R-Indianapolis, Ind.); and Mayor Mick Cornett (R-Oklahoma City, Okla.).

Aside from the plenary sessions, the agenda was jam-packed with informative and interactive concurrent sessions presented by a range of education experts on topics such as: early warning systems and dropout prevention; transforming secondary schools to improve student success; best practices in wraparound support services; state-level strategies for raising graduation rates; the challenges of rural education; ensuring teacher effectiveness; importance of grade level reading in students success; family engagement; and alternative pathways to dropout recovery.



The activities on March 23 included a special Summit roundtable on the educational needs of military children featuring Deborah Mullen, military families advocate and spouse of Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In addition, a group of nearly 150 summit attendees met with their Congressional representatives to discuss dropout prevention and supporting the Alliance's Grad Nation campaign.

The Summit was sponsored by Grad Nation Presenting Sponsor State Farm Insurance Companies, Premier Sponsors, AT&T and Target and Signature Sponsors, the Pearson Foundation and PepsiCo Foundation. As part of its commitment to helping children read proficiently by the end of third grade, Target highlighted its plans to donate \$1 billion by the end of 2015 to support education. AT&T announced a new \$2 million investment to support the dropout prevention work of the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Data Quality Campaign and Civic Enterprises.