

An indictment of the profit system

High school drop-out rate in major US cities at nearly 50 percent

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A report released Tuesday by an educational advocacy group founded by retired general and former Bush administration Secretary of State Colin Powell finds that almost half of all public high school students in the US' fifty largest cities fail to graduate.

The report states that only 52 percent of public high school students in these cities graduate after four years, while the national average is 70 percent. Some 1.2 million public high school students drop out every year, according to researchers.

The report finds that, overall, 17 of the public school systems in 50 major cities have graduation rates of 50 percent or lower, and the average graduation rate of all 50 systems is 58 percent. The findings are based on federal Department of Education statistics for the 2003-2004 school year.

The study, sponsored by America's Promise Alliance and prepared by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, also shows a staggering difference between the drop-out rates in major urban school districts and those in adjoining and more affluent suburban districts. Overall, high school graduation rates are 15 percentage points lower in urban schools as compared to those in the suburbs. In twelve cities, the disparities exceed 25 percentage points.

In some cases, the gap between the cities, with their large concentrations of working class and poor residents, and the suburbs is even greater. The widest discrepancies cited in the report are in Baltimore, Maryland, where only 34.6 percent of public high school students graduate, and its suburbs, where 81.5 percent acquire diplomas after four years, and in Columbus, Ohio, with a graduation rate of 40.9 percent as compared to 82.9 percent in the suburbs.

The city-suburb split is also immense in such

metropolitan centers as New York (47.4 percent vs. 82.9 percent), Cleveland (42.2 percent vs. 78.1 percent), Philadelphia (49.2 percent vs. 82.4 percent), Chicago (55.7 percent vs. 84.1 percent), Los Angeles (57.1 percent vs. 77.9 percent), and Atlanta (46.1 percent vs. 61.8 percent).

A separate chart showing the graduation rates for the principal school districts in the 50 largest US cities points to the virtual collapse of public education in major urban centers.

Detroit, by many calculations the poorest US city, graduates less than 25 percent (24.9 percent) of its public high school students. Indianapolis Public Schools graduate 30.5 percent of their students, and the figures for the Cleveland Municipal City School District and the Baltimore City Public School System are 34.1 percent and 34.6 percent respectively.

Powell founded America's Promise Alliance, which is chaired by his wife, Alma, and is described as a joint effort of nonprofit groups, corporations, charities, community leaders, faith-based organizations and individuals. The former Secretary of State said of the study, "When more than 1 million students a year drop out of high school, it's more than a problem, it's a catastrophe."

The concluding section of the document released by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, which publishes *Education Week*, addresses the central issue of social inequality that is reflected in the drop-out statistics. "If three out of every 10 students in the nation failing to graduate is a reason for concern," it states, "then the fact that just half of those educated in America's largest cities are finishing high school truly raises cause for alarm. And the much higher rates of high school completion among their suburban counterparts—who may literally live and

attend school right around the corner—place in particularly harsh and unflattering light the deep undercurrents of inequality that plague American public education.”

Rick Dalton, president of College for Every Student, a Vermont group that helps low-income students prepare for college, said the urban-suburban divergence “just speaks to the crisis in the US. It is about income. Family income drives it all.”

The study also notes that drop-out rates are substantially higher for blacks and other minorities. It states: “The gaps between whites and historically disadvantaged minority groups can reach as high as 25 percentage point nationally.”

One measure of the social implications of the decay of the public school system was noted by researchers, who said people failing to graduate from high school were eight times more likely to end up in prison.

Of the twelve cities where the graduation gap between urban and suburban schools exceeds 25 percentage points, nine are in the Northeast and Midwest. This is the so-called “rust belt,” where three decades of plant closures in such key industries as auto and steel have had the most devastating impact. In cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Buffalo, Cleveland, Chicago and Detroit, millions of decent-paying jobs have been wiped out, workers’ wages and living standards have been driven down, and the basic social infrastructure of entire communities has been gutted.

This process, carried out under Democratic as well as Republican administrations on the national, state and local level, has had its counterpart in tax cuts for the wealthy, deregulation of big business, cuts in social services and a concentrated assault on public education for the working class. By such means, a massive redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top has been effected, with the economy and government policy increasingly concentrated on generating ever greater income for a fabulously wealthy elite on the basis of speculation on the stock market and other parasitic forms of financial manipulation, including no small amount of outright swindling.

The Bush administration’s so-called “No Child Left Behind” educational policy, enacted with the support of congressional Democrats, has marked an intensification of the assault on public education for the majority of the population. The program, which sets performance benchmarks for public schools, entails punitive measures, up to and including the shutdown of schools that fail to “perform.” It has gone hand in hand with government

subsidies of various kinds for private schools and the encouragement of “charter schools” and for-profit schools that drain resources from urban public school districts.

The inevitable—and intended—result is a more and more openly class-based education system, in which working-class youth receive substandard schooling.

The response of the Bush administration to the America’s Promise Alliance report was to call for a more standardized means of tracking drop-out rates, within the framework of “No Child Left Behind.”

The vast chasm between city and suburban schools is but one expression of a society increasingly polarized between a wealthy elite and the rest of the population. Recent studies by Edward N. Wolff of the Levy Economics Institute of Bard College reveal that the top 1 percent of the US population holds 34.3 percent of the net worth of American households. The richest 10 percent of the population holds nearly 71 percent of the national household wealth. The bottom 80 percent of American households accounts for just 15.3 percent of wealth. The bottom 40 percent of households possesses just 0.2 percent of wealth.

It is this last segment of the population that largely comprises the populations of cities like Detroit, Cleveland and Indianapolis where high school drop-out rates range from 65 percent to 75 percent.

These statistics reveal the nightmarish reality behind the “American Dream” and similar clichés beloved of the media and the political establishment. The destruction of education for millions of working class youth gives the lie to the democratic pretensions of the American ruling elite.

None of the major presidential candidates and neither of the two big business parties can address the virtual collapse of public education revealed in the report issued on Tuesday. It starkly exposes the socially destructive and irrational workings of the capitalist system, which is defended by the Democrats and Republicans, and which has as its fundamental social principle not the common good, but the enrichment of a wealthy elite at the expense of the vast majority of the people.



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