AT&T Releases ‘Raising Their Voices,’ a New Study Into Causes and Solutions for the High School Dropout Crisis

In Response to Key Research Finding, National Education Association Takes Lead in Launching Series of Community Dialogues

Washington, DC (PRWEB) March 10, 2010 -- With the high school dropout crisis continuing to erode our nation’s educational and economic fabric, AT&T recently released, “Raising Their Voices: Engaging Students, Teachers, and Parents to Help End the High School Dropout Epidemic,” the fourth in a series of groundbreaking studies by Civic Enterprises and Peter D. Hart Research that examines the alarming dropout rates through the eyes of high school dropouts, students, teachers and parents.

While shining a spotlight on the teen dropout issue, Raising Their Voices offers a number of recommendations on how to confront the problem at the local level and demonstrates the tremendous value of engaging students, teachers, and parents in candid, face-to-face dialogues on the topic.

Inspired by the report and building upon its own experiences of forging consensus, the National Education Association (NEA), in collaboration with AT&T, announced it is preparing to launch a series of similar dialogues in school districts across the nation to help mobilize local communities to improve graduation rates.

“Our partnership with AT&T is a perfect example of what happens when we work together to make our public schools great,” said NEA President Dennis Van Roekel. “In addition to validating and supporting our 12-point dropout prevention plan, Raising Their Voices sheds light on this important issue and demonstrates AT&T’s continued commitment to improving public education.”

Meanwhile, Raising Their Voices offers not only ideas and hope for the future, but it is a practical resource today for local school districts that want to increase graduation rates. The full Raising Their Voices report includes guidelines that can be used in other communities to facilitate their own action-oriented conversations on keeping teenagers in school.

The Dropout Crisis

The numbers are staggering. Nearly one-third of all public high school students—and almost one half of minorities—fail to graduate with their class, totaling more than 1.2 million each year.

Raising Their Voices is being released just days after President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan again discussed how low graduation rates are having a profound impact on the nation, while proposing $900 million in grants to turn around the lowest performing high schools.

“The nation's dropout rate is too high. We lose 1.2 million students each year to the streets. That is economically unsustainable and morally unacceptable,” said Secretary Duncan. “We need to prepare our students for success in college and careers. Our nation’s economic future depends on it. We all have to come together to address this national crisis, with the private sector working with schools to find a solution.”

“The Administration’s support for private sector programs like AT&T Aspire that aim to prepare our students for their best futures has been a real motivator to all of us,” said Randall Stephenson, Chairman, Chief
Executive Officer and President of AT&T says, "Addressing our high school dropout crisis is one of the keys to driving long-term American competitiveness globally."

Before research began for Raising Their Voices in 2009, three earlier research reports focused on the distinct perspectives of high school dropouts (Silent Epidemic, 2006), parents (One Dream, Two Realities, 2007), and teachers (On the Front Lines of Schools, 2009). These studies made it clear that the three constituencies share different and often conflicting views of the causes and cures of dropping out.

To gather additional insight, Civic Enterprises and Peter D. Hart Research, on behalf of AT&T and the America’s Promise Alliance, assembled students, teachers, and parents from local communities for candid face-to-face dialogues to explore the dropout issue from their unique points of view. Raising Their Voices summarizes those discussions, and includes recommendations, with particular emphasis on making sure students have a better understanding of how classroom activities relate to workplace and life success.

Beyond the ‘Blame Game’

"Raising Their Voices is a wake-up call to the nation that teachers, students, and parents have perspectives that are critical to solving the high school dropout epidemic. By engaging in dialogues, these three vital groups dispel stereotypes, foster a spirit of mutual respect, and provide common solutions that will help keep more students on track to finish high school and attend college," said Civic Enterprises CEO John Bridgeland.

"The act of bringing these individuals together around one table not only shed light on the challenges each group faces, but it elevated their interest in combating the problem. As expected, the discussions varied from city to city, but the findings have broader implications that will serve anyone interested in lifting the graduation rates of their high school students,” Bridgeland said.

The new study focused on four public high schools—one each in Indianapolis, Dallas, Baltimore, and Kingsport, Tenn. The groups at each school included approximately 15 participants, with an even mix of students, parents, and teachers. The schools selected offered a diversity of locations and demographics. The groups included students at-risk of dropping out and parents of at-risk students, as well as teachers of at-risk students.

Kolleen Davis, a 10th grader at Baltimore Talent Development High School, said that participating in the dialogue in her community helped change her perspective.

“I learned how other people felt. It wasn’t just my opinions (that counted). Now that I had a chance to hear other people’s opinions, I have changed my outlook,” Davis said, noting that she now realizes the issue is more complex than she had originally believed.

Among the recommendations that emerged from Raising Their Voices were:

• Candid dialogue among the three constituencies is necessary to move beyond the “blame game” and to forge a collective will to ensure more students graduate from high school.
• Teachers should make more explicit connections between coursework and the real world and draw on resources in communities to make these examples tangible.
• Adult advocates who connect community-based supports to struggling students should be made available so students can get the help they need inside and outside of the classroom.
• Students should be exposed to a rigorous curriculum aligned with post-secondary standards and other opportunities to develop skills so every student has the opportunity to prepare for a post-secondary education, whether it is college, trade school, or other advanced training. To that end, individual student plans and collaboration among teachers should be encouraged so all students can meet high standards.
• Communications between teachers and parents is essential, and technological resources should be applied to make these connections as quickly as possible.

Local Momentum

By taking the lead in organizing and hosting similar dialogues in a group of school districts across the nation, the NEA will continue the momentum to find solutions at the local level.

“The need for community dialogues is the most striking report finding,” said Laura Sanford, President of the AT&T Foundation. “We’re so pleased that the NEA has taken a leadership role in launching additional dialogues in communities around the country.”

“NEA has been a leader in promoting the value of collaboration and discovering ways to tap into the potential of our schools and kids. Their invaluable experience and knowledge is precisely what this initiative needs to succeed and grow,” Sanford said.

“The findings from AT&T’s Raising Their Voices were enlightening. We are looking forward to using their dialogues as a model for our own, and continuing where this research left off,” Van Roekel said.

VanRoekel noted that the NEA has already engaged Ohio teachers, administrators, political leaders, and other stakeholders in successful “transformational dialogues,” and that they are pursuing the same initiative in North Carolina. NEA also has an extensive Public Engagement Program that brings together community stakeholders to address achievement gaps, improve student outcomes, and make classroom work relevant through service-learning opportunities for students. The program has proven effective in engaging local stakeholders in these efforts in a number of states including Arkansas, California, Florida, Nebraska, New Mexico, and Oklahoma.

Locations for the NEA-organized dialogues patterned after Raising Their Voices research program have not yet been determined. Additional details will be announced in coming weeks.

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About Hart Research
Hart Research has been one of America’s leading public opinion and market research firms for nearly four decades, including two decades as the pollster for NBC News and The Wall Street Journal. In addition to its long-standing research practice in electoral politics, Hart Research conducts extensive research for 6 major corporations, major foundations (including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), public interest organizations (including the United Negro College Fund and Environmental Defense), and educational institutions (including the College Board and the University of California system). Hart Research’s work in education ranges from issue- and policy-oriented projects for advocacy groups and other nonprofit organizations, to image and reputation studies for colleges and universities. In addition to conducting research on such topics as college-preparedness and the cost of inadequate preparation for college, the role of individual colleges and universities within their larger communities, union representation in higher education, and the college application and admissions process, Hart Research was chosen to conduct original research to inform three previous reports on the dropout issue: "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives on High School Dropouts," "One Dream, Two Realities: Perspectives of Parents on America's High Schools," and "Engaged for Success: Service-Learning as a Tool for High School Dropout Prevention."

About NEA
The National Education Association is the nation’s largest professional organization, representing 3.2 million elementary and secondary teachers, higher education faculty, education support professionals, school
administrators, retired educators and students preparing to become teachers.

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