



Club alumnus Jayson Telles holds up one of several acceptance letters he received (left). Rachel Hernandez, San Pedro High School class of 2005 and College Bound participant, receives her diploma from now-retired principal Stephen H. Walters (above).

## Confronting America's High School Dropout Crisis, *One Club at a Time*

By Judith J. Pickens, M.Ed.

*"Thirty percent? Are you serious?"*

That astonished response is typical of the reaction I often receive from a person unacquainted with America's high school dropout crisis. Unfortunately, the situation is all too serious. In the 2006 report, "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts" (*The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*), researchers found nearly one-third of all public high school students fail to graduate with their class, a number that rises to almost 50 percent for African-American, Latino and Native American youth.

Why do so many of our children choose to abandon their educations and, consequently, reasonable prospects for a productive, meaningful future? Reasons cited by participants in the Gates Foundation study include:

- Uninteresting classes
- Low expectations of adults/teachers
- Unmotivated to work hard
- Lack of parental involvement

Interestingly, 88 percent of those surveyed (ages 16 to 25 in 25 urban, rural and suburban communities nationwide) had passing grades when they left school. In fact, 81 percent said they *knew* graduating was vital to their future success.

The 2005 Youth Report to America supports these numbers. More than 46,000 youths ages 13 to 18 participated in the survey, which was produced by Boys & Girls Clubs of America's Keystone Clubs and generously sponsored by American Express, a BGCA Centennial 2006 Presenting Sponsor [see pages 4-5 for more information]. Among the findings: 74 percent believe attending college is necessary to achieve career

goals. However, their greatest fear, other than going to war, is not graduating high school (26 percent). This situation must be addressed immediately and aggressively. Something is terribly wrong when one-third of American high school students opt to rob themselves of their future.

Despite these dire circumstances, there remains much that Boys & Girls Clubs can do – and are doing – to counteract this crisis.

### Helping Youth Envision a Bright Future

According to The Education Trust-West (a nonprofit organization dedicated to higher achievement at all grade levels), in 2003 just 61 percent of students who entered Sacramento, Calif., high schools four years earlier graduated. But at the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Sacramento, it is a different story.

In 2006, the Club's seven high school seniors each graduated and went on to junior college with the intention of transferring to a four-year school. In fact, the past two California Youth of the Year winners, Lyric Flood and Michael Thomas, are former Sacramento Club members now enrolled in pre-med programs – Michael at California State University, Sacramento, and Lyric at Clark Atlanta University, where he has a full scholarship.

Kim Williams, vice president of Program Services for the Sacramento Club, says the key to helping teenagers succeed is getting to know them. "A lot of them can't see the future, can't see past the neighborhood. They just know they want to get out of school. You need to change the way they think."

Williams says BGCA's CareerLaunch® – a career preparation program and Web site ([www.careerlaunch.net](http://www.careerlaunch.net)) – plays such an important role

in making teens aware of their options that each high school student at the Club is required to open a CareerLaunch account. “There is so much information there for them to find out about career options, education requirements, financial aid information. It’s a tool for them to see what else is out there.”

## Making College a Reality

Members of the class of 2000 from the Boys & Girls Club of the Los Angeles Harbor were missing a lot of their classmates – more than half had dropped out before graduating. Spurred to action, the Club developed College Bound, a program to improve graduation rates and make members aware of college opportunities. In 2005-06, 150 members participated. This four-year plan (grades 9-12) presents opportunities such as free daily tutoring, free SAT preparation courses, tours of local campuses, an annual college fair and staff who help navigate the oft-confusing world of college and financial aid applications.

“College Bound has motivated hundreds of our teens to not only prioritize the need for a high school diploma but to realize that a college education is the true goal for a life of quality,” says Club Executive Director Mike Lansing. “Five years ago, less than 50 percent of our teen members were graduating high school. The most recent graduating class has 26 out of 28 seniors accepted into higher education programs.”

## Reversing the Trend

The proliferation of high school dropouts in the United States is a dilemma our country cannot afford to continue – socially, ethically or economically. The outlook for dropouts is bleak. They are far more likely than peers with a degree to be unemployed, in prison, unhealthy, on public assistance, living in poverty and ultimately single parents raising children who, themselves, drop out. As a federation that collectively serves some 4.6 million young people annually through memberships and community outreach, the Boys & Girls Club Movement is in prime position to reverse this frightening trend. ■

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College Bound Liset Cabrera,  
SPHS Class of 2005.

## Deepening Impact

In 2004 and 2005, Boys & Girls Clubs of America conducted research with the Search Institute to identify key elements of positive youth development. It was found that the impact a Club has on young people depends greatly on the degree to which the Club implements five key elements:

1. **A Safe, Positive Environment** – providing a physically and psychologically safe haven.
2. **Fun** – reinforcing members’ capacity to learn while having fun; i.e., improving vocabulary and spelling by playing Scrabble®.
3. **Supportive Relationships** – Club staff demonstrate warmth, caring and guidance in their interactions. Have teen members lead the Power Hour program to provide homework assistance and tutoring for members ages 6 to 12.
4. **Opportunities and Expectations** – linking aspirations with concrete actions, the Goals for Graduation program introduces academic goal-setting to members ages 6 to 15. Staff can communicate opportunities and high expectations for all members.
5. **Recognition** – It is essential to affirm Club members’ intrinsic worth and accomplishments. One way to acknowledge those who work hard to do well in school is to post their photographs on a bulletin board.