

You Can't Teach Them If They're Not There!
A Strategy for Decreasing the Dropout Rate in Secondary Schools

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Executive Summary

In the United States today, only 71 percent of students graduate from high school. Half of all black and Latino students drop out before graduation. Among students who complete high school and go on to college, approximately one-third require remedial education.¹

These dire statistics prompted the National Governors' Association to develop *An Agenda for Action*. This agenda challenges political, business and education leaders to develop comprehensive plans for education reform in their states. The *Agenda for Action* does not, however, specifically address one of the biggest questions facing schools today:

How do we get students to stay in school?

This paper provides a unique perspective on the “drop out problem” in our secondary schools and outlines the Streetwise Strategy, a proven approach for solving this problem. The Streetwise Strategy is based on an understanding of the duality of American society and recognition of the fact that the public schools, as currently structured and operated, are irrelevant to young people who live outside the mainstream. It proposes that if schools establish non-threatening relationships with students, impose the consequences of their behavior, and redirect the talents and abilities students are using to survive outside the mainstream so that they can be successful in the mainstream, they will create a culture and learning environment that will keep students in school and motivate them to view education and graduation as keys to success.

The Streetwise Strategy has been proven effective in the US Department of Labor's Job Corps program in which hundreds of thousands of high-school dropouts have succeeded in becoming responsible citizens and productive employees. The following pages demonstrate the relevance of the Streetwise Strategy to America's public schools and the current drop out rates.

¹ Achieve, Inc. & The National Governors' Association. *An Action Agenda for Improving America's High Schools* (2005).

You Can't Teach Them If They're Not There!

Our nation's secondary schools are in crisis. *An Action Agenda for Improving America's High Schools (2005)*, a report by Achieve, Inc. and the National Governors' Association, recently stated the following:

“Nationwide, only 71 percent of students graduate from high school, and worse, only about half of black and Latino students graduate. Nearly a third of high school graduates who go on to college require immediate placement in remedial education courses.”

A report recently released by The Education Trust entitled, *Getting Honest About Grad Rates: How States Play The Numbers and Students Lose (June 2005)*, suggests that the actual drop out rate may be even worse. The Education Trust's report reveals that state graduation rates reported to the U.S. Department of Education are, in many cases, inaccurate and incomplete. Some states use questionable graduation rate definitions. Other states do not provide information about the graduation rates of low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency. The significance of these reporting practices is still being debated. However, it is clear that such practices do not meet the intent of the *No Child Left Behind Act* and, in particular, do not uphold the Act's first pillar: “Stronger Accountability for Results.” This pillar intends that all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency. Such proficiency cannot be achieved if a third of all students who enter the public schools drop out before graduating. Such proficiency cannot be achieved if a third of students who graduate and go on to college are not prepared for college level work.

These dire statistics prompted the Governors' Association to develop *An Agenda for Action*. This agenda challenges political, business and education leaders to develop comprehensive plans for their states. According to the agenda, states will:

- Restore the value of the high school diploma by revising academic standards, upgrading curricula and coursework, and developing assessments that align with the expectation of college and the workplace.
- Redesign the American high school to provide all students with the higher-level knowledge and skills, educational options, and support they must have to succeed.
- Give high school students the excellent teachers and principals they need by ensuring teachers and principals have the necessary knowledge and skills and by offering incentives to attract and retain the best and brightest to the neediest school and subjects.

- Hold high school and colleges accountable for student success by setting meaningful benchmarks, intervening in low-performing schools, and demanding increased accountability of postsecondary institutions.
- Streamline educational governance so that the K-12 and post-secondary systems work more closely together.

These actions are both necessary and promising. If carried out, they will significantly improve the quality of secondary education in this country. However, such actions will only benefit the young people who choose stay in school. They will not, in and of themselves, keep young people in school who do not want to be there. Students vote with their feet. If they do not feel school is relevant to their lives and if they do not believe they are learning things that matter to them, they leave. If they don't leave physically, they leave mentally by "tuning out" and not actively participating in their own education. Once they leave, the chance of helping them develop into responsible citizens and productive employees is gone. Therefore, the *Governors' Agenda for Action* needs to address one important question before any attempt at school reform or improvement can succeed: ***How do we get students to stay in school?***

This past spring, José M. deOlivares, President of Alternate Perspectives, Inc., spoke to several hundred educators at the *Conference on Reaching "At-Promise" Students* in San Diego, CA. The following excerpts from his speech provide a unique perspective on the "drop-out problem" in our secondary schools and outline a proven strategy for solving this problem. We believe the components of this strategy compliment the *Governors' Agenda for Action*.

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. I'm delighted to be here in San Diego and to have the opportunity to talk to you about Reaching "At-Promise Youth." I must warn you, however, that what I'm about to say might be considered controversial.

John Edwards was right on target during the recent Presidential campaign when he said that there are two Americas. But he was dead wrong when he suggested that those two Americas are separated by wealth and privilege. There are two Americas, two separate and very different societies in the United States, but what separates them is not wealth and privilege. What separates the two Americas is the fundamental principle on which this nation was foundedthe principle of law.

The first America is the one we live in, the Mainstream. It consists of all the people who have chosen to live their lives within the parameters of the law. They've made that choice for a lot of different reasons, but primarily because they know that the law protects them and, in so doing, guarantees them a future. So, they plan for that future, set goals for themselves and when they reach those goals they call it success

The other America calls itself the Street. It consists of all the people who have chosen to live their lives without regard for the Mainstream's laws. Again, there are lots of reasons why they've made that choice, but it usually boils down to their believing that they can't get what they need in the Mainstream. These people get what they need anyway they can in that other American, and they hold on to it anyway they can for as long as they can. They have dreams and they make plans like everyone else, but their goal is not success as we would define it in the Mainstream. Since they don't live within the law they're not protected by it and they aren't guaranteed a future, so their goal is to survive for another day. Living in that other America is called "being on the street" - not to be confused with being homeless, which is just physically living on the street because you don't have a home. You can live in a mansion and still "be on the street." The term the Mainstream uses to label people who live without regard for its laws is - criminal.

I understand why a lot of people don't see the distinction I'm making between the Street and the Mainstream. It's because the line that divides these two Americas isn't tangible. The law isn't a thing or a place. It's an idea. In effect, both Americas occupy the same time and space. And there are no distinguishing characteristics that identify you as living in one America or the other. We don't know someone is a criminal until they get caught breaking the law. Who would have thought Martha Stewart was a felon?

You choose to live within the law or you don't. That's what determines which America you live in. It's not about how much money you have or how much education you have. It's not about the right side of the tracks versus the wrong side of the tracks or the "haves" versus the "have nots." And it certainly isn't about the color of your skin or your ethnic heritage. The son of a doctor who steals his father's prescriptions is just as much a criminal as the drug dealer he sells them to. And the welfare mother living in the housing projects and attending a job-training program in the evening to make a better life for her family is not a criminal just because a lot of her neighbors may be.

One more thing, you can't be a little bit Street and little bit Mainstream. It's like being pregnant. You are or you aren't. Once you break the law you create the possibility of being arrested, convicted and put in prison for the crime you've committed, and that puts you smack dab in the middle of that other America, whether you cheated on your taxes or held up a convenience store.

Why is this distinction important?

It's important because almost half of the teenagers in the United States today are living in, or are at serious risk of winding up in, that other America. If we want to reach them we need to know where they are, and that's where they are, "on the street." This distinction is especially important to any discussion of education in the United States because the public schools are Mainstream institutions and, as such, are totally irrelevant to young people who are living in that other America. A high school education and a high school diploma will help you succeed in the Mainstream. But if you don't live in the Mainstream because you don't believe you can get what you need there, a high school

education and a high school diploma are of no value to you because they won't help you survive "on the street."

What do we say when we see young people who don't behave the way we think they should, when we see them using drugs, joining gangs, "hooking" up and dropping out of school? We say, "What's wrong with them?" Don't we? If we think that there's something wrong with these young people, we only have one logical course of action, which is to figure out what's wrong with them and fix it. We've been trying to do that for decades. We've blamed everything from the nuclear arms race to rock and roll for their inappropriate behavior and we've developed hundreds of programs to address every conceivable "causative factor." But we're still not making very much progress. Sure, crack cocaine use is down, but crystal meth and designer drug use is up. Drive-by-shootings have become less frequent in the inner cities, but schoolyard massacres are becoming all too common in the suburbs. The problem isn't going away. Don't delude yourselves into thinking it's getting better. It isn't. It's just changing.

The reason the problem isn't going away is because we're trying to fix what's wrong with these young people and there is nothing wrong with them. They've just chosen to live in the other America because they don't believe they can get what they need in our America. Once we understand that, we can stop wasting our time and energy trying to fix something that isn't broken and we can focus our efforts on bringing these young people back to the Mainstream by showing them how to get what they need there.

That isn't easy to do because the fact is they can get more of what they need and they can get it faster "on the street." The Mainstream doesn't make it very easy for young people to get what they need. We love babies and little children, but we don't have much tolerance for young people when they reach adolescence and discover that they have minds of their own and that all their body parts finally work. We continue to treat adolescents like children in the Mainstream, but we expect them to act like adults. The freedom, opportunity and excitement of the Street offer a very tempting alternative to the do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do Mainstream. What young people don't realize is, the Street is a dead end, and if they're "on the street," sooner or later they're going to wind up dead or in jail.

If this is the reality we're facing (and it is), what do we do about it?

Well... I have good news for you. There is a strategy that works. I call it the Streetwise Strategy. I wish I could tell you I invented it, but I didn't. I just packaged it and gave it a name. It's what worked with me when I was a juvenile delinquent growing up in the South Bronx in New York City; and it has worked for me for more than forty years enabling me to help thousands of young people get "off the street," and into the Mainstream. It consists of three principles:

- 1) Establishing a non-threatening relationship with the young people you want to reach

- 2) Imposing the consequences of behavior, and
- 3) Redirecting the talents and abilities young people are using to survive on the Street so that they can be successful in the Mainstream

These three principles serve two purposes. They are the basis for individual, one-on-one interventions that help young people living “on the street” cross back over the line to the Mainstream. They are also the basis for structuring and operating our schools so that they support and encourage young people to come back to the Mainstream.

My book, *Bring Them Back Alive: Helping Teens Get Out and Stay Out of Trouble* (Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004), focuses on how to use the Streetwise Strategy as an intervention tool. I want to talk to you about how you can use the Streetwise Strategy as a basis for structuring and operating your schools.

Before we talk about the Streetwise Strategy, you have to understand that you can't make anyone do anything. You can prevent them from doing something through the use of physical force, but you can't make them do anything. That's because action requires will and will requires choice. All you can hope to do is influence the choices people make.

This concept is at the heart of the three principles that form the Streetwise Strategy, so it is essential that you understand it. No one in this room can make me leave the room if I choose not to. You can prevent me from staying here by picking me up and throwing me out, but no one can make me choose to leave. I know some of you are thinking, “I bet if I put a gun to his head, he'd choose to leave.” Not necessarily. History is filled with the stories of martyrs who chose not respond to someone's demands even though it cost them their lives.

Principle # 1 – Establishing a non-threatening relationship

If you live in the Street society, the Criminal Justice System, and by association all authority figures, are your enemies. That's not a perception. That's a fact. The Criminal Justice System doesn't work for all Americans. It only works for the Mainstream and its job is to catch the people who live “on the street” and are breaking the law, and lock them up so that they can't hurt the people who live in the Mainstream.

It stands to reason that if you are perceived as an authority figure, no Street person in his or her right mind is going listen to you, trust you or be influenced by anything you say. You're the enemy. That's why you have to establish a non-threatening relationship with the young people you're trying to reach. You do that by positioning yourself as someone who is trying to help young people get back into the Mainstream and get what they need there, and not as someone whose role is to defend Mainstream values and keep everyone who doesn't share those values out.

On an individual level, you do that with accountability, respect and consistency. On an organizational level, the only way to do that is by inclusion. You have to convince

students that the school is theirs; that its purpose is to help them get what they need. That will only happen when the students have a voice and a vote in how the school is run; and that includes what the rules are, what's taught and how it's taught. That doesn't mean students control the school, but it does mean they have to be involved in the administration of the school, in the selection of the curriculum and in the evaluation of teachers. That's a scary thought if you've never been in that kind of environment before, but until you establish a culture where the young people who live in that other America believe that the school they attend is there to help them meet their needs, the best pedagogy, the most up-to-date curriculum and the most modern facilities in the world aren't going to have any impact on them. If school isn't about helping them meet their needs it is of absolutely no use to young people living in the Street society.

For young people living in that other America, the educational experience has to start where they are. They have to see their school as being for them and about them and you do that by including them in the running of the school. If you don't, they will continue to leave; and you can't teach them anything once they're gone.

I told you this might be controversial.

Principle #2 – Imposing the consequences of behavior.

The Street is a victim-predator world. Stuff happens on the Street. That's not the exact word they use, but I think you can figure it out. The point is the concept of personal responsibility doesn't exist in that other America.

If we're going to help young people living in that other America get what they need in the Mainstream, we have to teach them that they are responsible for their actions. Stuff doesn't just happen. We cause it to happen with the choices we make and the actions we take. You can't just tell someone that. They have to experience it to understand it and believe it.

That means our schools have to be structured in such a way that students experience the consequences of their actions. When they make the right choice and do the right thing, their lives get better. When they make the wrong choice and do the wrong thing, then they have to make another choice, which is to make what they did wrong, right, or accept the punishment. It's the process of making choices and experiencing the consequences of those choices that teaches young people that they don't have to be victims or predators. They can be the masters of their own fate.

That's not what most schools do. They just arbitrarily punish the troublemakers and if that doesn't work, and it usually doesn't, they exclude them from the school.

I have to tell you a story.

When I was growing up in New York, the State had a program called the Farm Cadets. It sent youngsters from the city to work on farms for the summer to keep them out of trouble. It was decided that I could benefit from that program, so in the summer of my fourteenth year I found myself up near the St. Lawrence Seaway working on a dairy farm. One week we put up an electric fence to make a temporary pasture for some of the cattle. The day after we finished putting up the fence, Ben, the farmer who lived down the road and picked up our milk to take to the dairy co-op, came by and stopped to talk to my farmer, whose name was Luther. In retrospect, I think Ben was a couple of sandwiches short of a picnic.

Ben said, "I see you put up a 'lectric fence." Luther said, "Yup." Ben said, "I had me one a them one'st. I had me this pig that would rut my yard up somethin' fierce, so I put up one a them fences to keep him outta the yard." Luther said, "How'd it work." Ben said, "It din't. The pig tore the fence up along with everthin' else." I could see Luther's face sag and I knew he was thinking if these things won't hold a pig, they'll never hold a herd of cattle. Ben saw Luther's disappointment, too, and added, "But I fixed it. I took that box out and plugged the whar right into the wall." "What happened," Luther asked. "Well," Ben said, "the pig got to ruttin' about and he went up against the whar and it kilt the sum-a-bitch dead right on the spot."

You have to understand I grew up in the city and didn't know much about farming, so I asked Ben, "Why did you do that?" I'll never forget his answer. He looked straight at me with a toothless grin on his smug face and said, "Well now boy, I sure 'nuff taught that pig a lesson, din't I? He'll never rut my yard up again."

Poor Ben didn't get it. He didn't teach the pig anything. He just prevented it from doing more damage.

Suspending or expelling troublemakers from school doesn't teach them anything. It just prevents them from further disrupting the school. The message that sends to other students is, "This school is about our needs, not about your needs." That message just confirms what young people living in the Street society already suspect... that school isn't about them, there is nothing there for them and there is no reason for them to be there.

Students must be given every opportunity to benefit from their accomplishments and learn from their mistakes. There are an infinite number of creative ways to do that. "Killing the pig" isn't one of them.

Principle #3 – Redirecting the talents and abilities young people are using to survive on the Street so that they can be successful in the Mainstream.

Not everyone in the Mainstream succeeds to the same degree and not everyone on the Street survives to the same degree. It takes talent and ability to succeed and to survive. What you have to do is look past the inappropriate, offensive, even repulsive behavior

and objectively assess the talents and abilities it takes to do those things and not get hurt or get caught. Young people in the Mainstream don't always know what they're good at. They don't have to. They have a future and they have the time to try different things until they find what they like and are good at. Young people "on the street" don't have that luxury. If they try doing things to survive that they don't do well, they are going to get hurt or get caught. So, they figure out what they're good at in a hurry. For example, you'll never see a fat purse-snatcher. Fat people can't run fast enough to get away and they'll get caught. Fat kids know how fast they can run and they won't become purse-snatchers. You won't see clumsy shoplifters, either. And you'll never see a little, skinny kid with thick glasses and a squeaky voice try to intimidate or mug you. You're just not going to be afraid of him if he comes up to you and says, "Give me \$20 or I'll break your face." He might hack into your computer and steal the mid-term exam and sell it to his friends for \$10 a piece, but he won't get the money he needs to survive as an intimidator or a mugger.

If young people are surviving "on the street," and they are surviving if they're not dead or in jail, you can be certain they are doing what they are good at doing to survive. On an individual level, you have to find out what that is, acknowledge it and then work with students individually to help them apply their unique talents and abilities to achieve success in the Mainstream.

On an organizational level, that's going to require significant changes in staff perceptions, organizational culture and school policy. If you have gang leaders in your school, you are going to have to involve them in student government. If you have drug dealers, you're going to have to involve them in the student store or the Junior Achievement Program. If you have people involved in physical crimes, like fighting or burglary or purse snatching, you're going to have to involve them in the athletic programs. That's how my life got turned around. My thing "on the street" was knocking people down, taking what they had and running fast to get away. I discovered that if I did those things on the football field rather than in the neighborhood, instead of chasing after me, people would stand up and cheer.

I'd be willing to bet that each of you can name five or six people in your school right now who would raise hell if you tried to involve a suspected gang leader in student government or a suspected drug dealer in the student store. You will need to get these people turned around and on board, because if you don't, they will fight your attempts to redirect your students' talents and abilities and the losers in that battle will be your students.

So those are the three principles – establishing a non-threatening relationship, imposing the consequences of behavior and redirecting talents and abilities. If you structure and operate your school to reflect these three principles you will create a culture and a learning environment in your school that shows young people living in that other America that there is a place for them in the Mainstream by giving them a place in the Mainstream. Once they believe that there is a place for them in the Mainstream, then

getting an education and a diploma will become relevant to them because that's how you succeed in the Mainstream.

I realize that what I'm suggesting you do may sound like a daunting task. I admit it's no walk in the park. But it can and has been done and you're going to have to do it if you want to reach the "At Promise Youth" this conference is all about and help them cross back over the line and get what they need in the Mainstream. Because if you don't reach them, they will drop out of school, drop out of the workforce, drop out of the consumer marketplace and drop out of the tax base....and that my friends will be bad business, bad politics and bad news for our country.

Thank you for listening. And remember, "don't kill the pig."

As Mr. deOlivares states in his speech, the Streetwise Strategy works. The most compelling evidence of its effectiveness is the Department of Labor's Job Corps Program. The principles of the Streetwise Strategy have been at the heart of the Job Corps Program throughout its 40 year history and are the primary reason Job Corps has succeeded with hundreds of thousands of young people who dropped out of the public school system. Job Corps' success has less to do with increased standards and test scores and everything to do with organizational culture. Job Corps centers that consistently achieve the highest academic and vocational outcomes, as reflected by the Job Corps Outcomes Measurement System, also consistently score highest on quarterly Student Satisfaction Surveys. The Job Corps' experience is dramatic proof that schools that are student oriented, provide students with a voice in how the school is run, impose the consequences of student behavior, and redirect and build upon the talents and abilities of students, do a better job of retaining and educating students than schools that do not reflect these principles.

The Job Corps' experience should not come as a surprise. Extensive research into productivity in the workplace concludes that worker involvement significantly contributes to productivity and that workers whose needs are met are the most productive.

Dr. Linda Gravett, a human resource management consultant and the author of *Human Resource Ethics: Perspectives for a New Millennium* provides the following perspective:

"My research over the past 15 years has shown that there's a definite, strong correlation between employee involvement and productivity. Other researchers have discovered similar results. For instance, research by Roger E. Herman and Joyce L. Gioia found that the opportunity to collaborate with coworkers and managers was the top response when employees across the country were asked what they want most in the workplace. As leaders, we must have input from those who know the job best – those who are actually doing the work. In order to feel connected to their work, employees need to have a say in their work environment."

Students are a school's equivalent to employees in the workplace. They do the work. They produce the learning gains and test results on which schools are measured. Faculties are a school's equivalent to management in the workplace. They plan and supervise the learning that takes place in the school. Schools that recognize these parallels are not only more productive in terms of meeting the goals for which they are held accountable, but they better prepare their students for success in the workplace. And isn't success in the workplace, along with responsible citizenship, the goal of education?

The purpose of this paper has been to remind educational practitioners and policy makers that the knowledge and experience needed to keep young people in school exists. The failures of our public schools are reaching crisis proportions at the very time that the need for effective schools is greater than it has ever been. We no longer have the luxury of debating educational theories or jockeying to protect special interests within the educational community. We know what works. It is time to stop talking about results and start achieving them.

About the Authors:

Dr. Jennifer Wild is Founder and CEO of *Alternate Perspectives, Inc.*, past President of *Applied Technology Systems Incorporated*, and Co-founder of *WILL - Women in Leadership and Learning*. Dr. Wild is a well-known behavior scientist and organization development practitioner with over 25 years of experience in the field of education. She is also one of only woman to be President of a company that operated Job Corps Centers under contract to the U.S. Department of Labor. She has developed organizational assessments, and taught workshops, seminars, and conferences for educational institutions, industry, and government in the United States and abroad. She also serves on the Board of Directors of the prestigious Embassy Series in Washington, DC.

José M. deOlivares has spent the past 40 years helping teenagers straighten out their lives. He has worked in law enforcement, drug treatment and prevention, education and job training. For the past 12 years he served as Regional Director of the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Job Corps in Dallas, TX, where he was responsible for the operation of 24 Job Corps Centers in 11 states serving 15,000 students. He recently retired from the federal service and is currently Executive Director of the *Institute for the Mainstreaming of Marginalized Youth*. He is also the author of the critically acclaimed book, *Bring Them Back Alive: Helping Teens Get Out and Stay Out of Trouble* (Taylor, 2004.)

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