

**Opening the door to a brighter future**



Reach Out to Dropouts Walk  
Partnership Kit



[ExpectationGraduation.org](http://ExpectationGraduation.org)

*Founding Partners: City of Houston, Houston Independent School District and the Houston A+ Challenge*

# Call to Action

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We live in an age when the ability of an individual to be successful depends largely on their education. The success of a community, in turn, depends on having an educated workforce, prepared for jobs with a future. The doors of opportunity will not be opened to students who do not complete high school. City leaders must work in part with school districts, community organizations and businesses to reach out to the students who are leaving high school before they receive a diploma. High school dropouts are not only a school district issue; they are a community issue.

In 2006-07, **134,676** students were **lost from public school enrollment** in Texas.

High school dropouts are **three times** more likely to be unemployed, **four times** more likely to receive government assistance and **eight times** more likely to be incarcerated.

The **1.26 million dropouts** in the class of 2006 - 07 will cost the U.S. economy nearly **\$329 billion** in lost income over their lifetime; **123,577** of those dropouts came from Texas and will cost our economy over **\$32 billion**.



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# Reach Out to Dropouts Walk



# Purpose

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Reach Out to Dropouts is a very effective program. It is also a very simple, efficient program that produces great outcomes at minimal expense. The framework that has worked well in Houston is easily adaptable to any city or school district. While additional details such as refreshments, t-shirts for walkers, and promotional banners and pencils have been added each year, the most important thing is still the knock on the door from a caring volunteer.



## Introduction

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Thousands of volunteers from all sectors of the Houston community have participated in Expectation Graduation's Reach Out to Dropouts Walk, an initiative to help stem the dropout epidemic. Over 4,000 students have returned to school since the first Walk in 2004. During the walk, volunteers led by the Mayor of Houston, other elected officials, and the Superintendent of the Houston Independent School District (HISD) personally knock on the doors of students who have not returned to school in the fall in an effort to convince them to return. Although these officials often receive the most credit for leading the walk, there are many community organizations that take the lead in planning and implementing the walk.

The annual Walk is held one week after the beginning of the school year; it is vital to reclaim these students before fall too far behind and become weighed down by a sense of never being able to catch up to their peers.

The Walk has provided community leaders, City and school district officials and administrators with a better understanding of the issues and roadblocks that confront many of the students who have left school. This increased awareness has allowed the City, school districts, and wider community to become more responsive to student needs, and craft solutions that enable their return to school.

Over the past few years, the Walk has grown from covering eight schools in the Houston Independent School District to over thirty schools in four Houston-area school districts. Plans are in place to add more schools from additional districts. School officials from other cities and states who have participated in the Walk have expressed strong interest in replicating this program.

As the Walk has grown, so have the partnerships between the school district and local community, business, and government organizations. Over 6,600 volunteers have reached out to students. Businesses, non-profit organizations, churches and neighborhood groups have adopted schools, donated goods and used their networks to get information out on the walk. Local television and radio stations have also helped spread the word and provide support. These partnerships are vital to the success of the initiative in every aspect. The support they generate helps balance fundraising responsibilities, raises public awareness of the city's educational efforts, and fosters media and public relations involvement in the city's education system. Ultimately, the energy generated by these partnerships draws new partners and supporters to the project.



# Reach Out to Dropouts Community Partnership



## Getting Started

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In 2004, a Graduation Summit was organized by Mayor Bill White of Houston, Houston Independent School District and the Houston A+ Challenge to increase public awareness of the dropout issue, develop ways to address it, and create action plans. The Summit was attended by nearly 400 area leaders in education, business, and community organizations in addition to parents and students. Summit attendees brainstormed in small groups and proposed solutions to the multiple causes of the dropout crisis. Truancy, gradual disengagement from the school community, mobility, immigrant, migrant, and over-age issues were examined. Before adjourning, the Summit attendees proposed and voted on solutions. Of course, all of these problems could not be solved overnight, but much progress was made.

Getting started involves the decision by the mayor and school district superintendent, with support from community officials and partners, to commit to the program. It is very important to seek out, establish, and build partnerships with business, government, and community organizations. They bring much needed energy, know-how, and funding to the initiative.

In Houston, key appointed officials help coordinate and implement Walk activities. The Superintendent of HISD appoints a **Project Coordinator** to serve as the primary contact person. They are charged with identifying other district staff members to get involved, communicating with principals, establishing and overseeing the timeline, and providing overall leadership support.

Following the Houston model, the Project Coordinator meets with the principals of the participating schools and asks them each to select a **Campus Project Leader**. The Campus Project Leader serves as the school's liaison for all Walk related activities and meetings. They are instrumental in recruiting faculty and staff from their schools to assist with the Walk. Depending on the size of the school district, a limited number of schools may participate the first year, with that number increasing each subsequent year.

The Houston A+ Challenge, a Houston-based non-profit organization, partnered in planning. They already had a working relationship with the school district and were able to provide financial support, solicit businesses and volunteers and share their strategic planning experience with community-wide events. The Project Coordinator for Houston A+ evolved over time. Initially, the Executive Director took the lead in planning and eventually the Public Engagement Coordinator became charged with those responsibilities.

The Walk is a great way to share and foster collaboration among city resources, counselors, outreach workers, social workers, and dropout prevention specialists in your community. Consider inviting some of these professionals to join the committee charged with planning and executing the event.



## Volunteers

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Volunteers play a key role before and during the Walk. All volunteers must be 18 and should commit to attending a training session. Prior to the Walk, volunteers make phone calls to students who have not returned to school after the first five days of absence, using a list provided by the school. Volunteers then gather information about why the students do not return; reasons may include enrollment in another school, enrollment in a GED program, relocation, or pregnancy. Volunteers also attempt to collect new contact information on students. Student records are then updated for both school and volunteer use.

On Walk Day, volunteers led by the mayor and school district officials venture out in teams in an effort to personally contact their assigned students and convince them to return to school. Make efforts to recruit some volunteers who are bilingual in languages appropriate for your school.

In just four short years, the number of students positively affected by the Reach Out to Dropouts Walk and the number of volunteers and community groups involved has increased dramatically. These numbers coupled with positive feedback provided by students and volunteers, educators, and community partners on the event present the best evidence of the value of the ROTD program. Business volunteer Kris Hines was with a group that included two HISD faculty members and a professor from the University of Houston and recalled knocking on the door of an 18-year old dropout and convincing him to return to school.

"After about 10 minutes of talking to him, you could see he really wanted to be back in school," Kris said. "He said that he did not think anybody at the school cared about him, but after seeing us at his doorstep, he knew we did. With tears in his eyes, he thanked us for coming by and encouraging him to return to school. ...What we did not know is his mother had been listening from inside. She came out in tears thanking us for helping [her son] get the help he needed to get his diploma, and for showing [him] that people cared about him and his education."

# The Community Organization Role

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**The role of the community organization is to help coordinate media for school officials and public relations for the walk, recruit volunteers, provide funding & in-kind donations, help plan and advertise the Walk.**

## **Strategic Planning**

Initially, the Houston A+ Challenge took a very active role in strategic planning and implementing the walk in Houston ISD. As the walk grows from year to year, the community organization's role in planning and implementation becomes less involved. For the first two years of the Walk in Houston ISD, the Houston A+ Challenge helped coordinate volunteer registration and phone bank logistics. They have also helped deliver walk materials to schools, provided "mini-grants" for schools to provide breakfast, have been available for media interviews and solicit volunteers.

## **Funding/In-Kind Donations**

The Reach Out to Dropouts Walk is based on a collaborative effort among government, school districts, corporations, and community groups and depends heavily on donated funds, goods, and services and volunteer hours, so the cost to the school district and city government remains low. The cost for the "Reach Out to Dropouts" walk for 2005 (16 schools) was \$15,000, not including those goods and services provided by in-kind donors and the services of volunteers. This \$15,000 includes \$3,000 for T-shirts and \$1,000 for training provided by strategic partners of HISD and \$11,000 collected by Houston A+ Challenge from donors to cover the costs of printing, office supplies and food.

In the past, corporations have provided volunteers and in-kind donations including phone bank services from Southwestern Bell, cell phones and service from Cingular (now AT&T), food for students and volunteers from Kroger and H-E-B grocery stores, and school supplies for returning students from Wal-Mart.

## **Media/Public Relations**

Community organizations may also help coordinate media and public relations efforts for the walk. Many organizations have e-newsletters that they can send to their organization's members and supporters.

## The Community Organization Role *cont'd*

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Ask your local media for help. They are often willing to place PSAs (public service announcements) on their stations, websites, and in printed materials. Suburban and smaller community newspapers have been particularly willing to promote the Walk.

### **Building a Community Network/Recruiting Volunteers**

The best place to look for volunteers is within your own schools and school district. Many of the staff, teachers, and members of parent organizations are willing to join this effort to bring students back to school and put them back on track toward graduation. Newsletters, announcements, websites, and school marquees can be used as recruitment tools. Also, tap into existing resource lists. Houston A+ Challenge is able to use their extensive business network and community contacts to help recruit volunteers for the Reach Out to Dropouts Houston Walk.

Look to the community at large. Many businesses, civic organizations, and houses of worship have volunteer groups that are interested in community outreach, particularly in the area of education. Enlist their volunteer support and ask them to promote the Walk in their organizations.



# The School District Role

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**The role of the school district is to identify staff members to be involved, communicate with principals, establish and oversee the timeline.**

## **The Project Coordinator**

In Houston, key appointed officials help coordinate and implement Walk activities. The HISD Superintendent has selected the Director of Student Engagement as the Project Coordinator, who will serve as the primary contact person charged with involving other district staff members in the program. The Project Coordinator's main responsibilities include: communicating with principals, establishing and overseeing the timeline, coordinating volunteer recruitment and training, developing printed informational materials for the home visits, collaborating with the Data and Research Department to identify the targeted students, organizing and operating a pre-Walk phone bank to gather data and resolve simple issues.

The Project Coordinator meets with the principals of participating schools and asks each to select a Campus Project Leader. The Campus Project Leader serves as the liaison between schools for all Walk-related activities and meetings. They are instrumental in recruiting faculty and staff from their schools to assist with the Walk and re-enrolling students who return the day of the Walk.

For more detailed information on the school district's role, Houston Independent School District has prepared an Information Manual to help interested districts organize their walk.



# The City Role

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**The role of the mayor's office is to utilize their "bully pulpit" to raise awareness to the problems and issue a call to action, to help establish community partnerships, and provide leadership by volunteering for the walk.**

## **The Bully Pulpit**

Mayors, even if they do not have official control over the school districts, have an obligation as leaders to use their "bully pulpit" to call attention to the problems and issue a call to action to address them. A Mayor can focus attention and inspire the commitment of resources by vast segments of the community. Mayor White and the Director of Education networked in the community to create and coordinate additional partners for Expectation Graduation. The Mayor regularly speaks to students about the importance of staying in school and encourages faculty in their profession.

## **Take a Lead Role**

Each fall Mayor Bill White takes a lead role in the Reach Out to Dropouts Walk to reclaim those students who have dropped out. Mayors can help to set the example for hundreds of volunteers by giving their time to personally volunteer with a team.

## **Build Consensus**

The government has learned that the Mayor and the city have considerable power to help solve the dropout problem and improve education in other ways even though the school districts formally govern the schools. It is important to build consensus across political, social, and economic lines and partner with many diverse community organizations, businesses, and all levels of the education establishment. Treating education as a strategic investment in the city's social and economic future is a lesson all cities must learn. The city learned that not only can successful dropout programs be devised and implemented but that they can be even more successful than anyone imagined.



## After The Walk

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It is crucial to the success of Expectation Graduation to sustain involvement after the initial emotional high and burst of activity of the "Reach Out To Dropouts" walks. Planning and working with so many different groups can be challenging, but sharing credit and giving credit to partners helps. It is also essential for the Mayor to consistently send the message that kids can be brought back to school and kept in school.

Facilitating access to social services and other pragmatic efforts such as having the schools open on the walk days to immediately re-enroll dropouts is important. There are so many resources available, but often those who need them the most are unaware of them. This is where the Mayor's role of building relationships can be so helpful, by connecting students and their families to the resources they need.



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