

Dropout rate sets off alarms [Samantha Marshall](#)

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On a recent wintry Friday morning in the Bronx, a group of teens from Youth Voice and the Smith High School step team took the stage to dance and rap to a rendition of James Brown's "Don't Be a Dropout."

They were performing for about 300 educators and dozens of politicians, including Rep. Charles Rangel and City Comptroller William Thompson, who convened in the Bronx recently to discuss a growing crisis in New York City: the rising dropout rate.

Despite Mayor Michael Bloomberg's best efforts to improve the city's education system, New York still boasts one of the nation's worst records for keeping kids in school, just behind Detroit and Baltimore. Close to 22,000 kids in New York City's public high schools left without a diploma in the 2005-06 academic year. That figure, called the "event" dropout rate, refers to the number of high school dropouts in a given year. The latest number represents a rise of almost 2,000 from 2003-04.

To address the problem, experts are pushing for legislation that would raise the legal age students are allowed to leave school to 18 from 16, which they say would help stop the thousands who fall just short of graduating each year from drifting out of the system. Educators are also urging investment in a computer system that tracks at-risk students and the creation of a dropout research center, something California has already done.

"We need to find sharply focused solutions and muster the political will to fix this," says Cary Goodman, executive director of nonprofit Directions for Our Youth, which organized the recent summit.

About 68,000 young people have dropped out over the past four years, and another 70,000 are considered at-risk by experts. This growing army—unqualified for even the most entry-level jobs—further exacerbates the problems businesses face because of New York's shrinking talent pool. Dropouts could also cost the city tens of billions in lost tax revenues and increased social service expenses.

"If we don't deal with them through more programs, we are going to deal with them through the justice system," says Hector Batista, executive director of Vocational Foundation Inc., a nonprofit that helps youngsters get job training and GEDs.

The Bloomberg administration has been spending in an effort to solve the problem. In 2005, the city established the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation to help troubled teens obtain diplomas. It budgeted \$31.4 million this year, and it plans to add \$14.5 million over the next two years for targeted services such as transfer and night schools and GED programs.

As a result of these initiatives, what the city calls the "cohort" dropout rate—a measure that accounts for those who have re-enrolled to get either a diploma or GED—shrank slightly, to 14.6% in 2005-06 from 16.3% in 2003-04. While the cohort figure suggests that the city's Department of Education is making progress with existing dropouts, the event number indicates that it has been less successful at reducing the flow of new ones.

Calling Congress

Nonprofits hope for more federal funds to get ahead of the problem as well as assist those who have already left school. For example, the amount of government funding that Vocational Foundation receives has shrunk from \$1.6 million to about \$200,000 since 2003.

Last year, Mr. Rangel introduced the National Dropout Prevention Act, which would earmark \$2.5 billion for the neediest schools; a sizable portion of the money would go to New York City. But it could take at least another year for the bill to get through Congress.

Meanwhile, additional parental involvement and teacher mentoring make students feel more engaged, and getting them to participate in the community allows them to see a role for themselves if they graduate, education experts say.

Take Ariana Giorgio, 16, a sophomore at the Wings Academy in the Bronx. She was already shaky in her studies, but her mother's death in December sent her over the edge. A teacher noticed her distress and began talking to her after class. After learning that Ms. Giorgio was interested in becoming a police detective, school officials got her into a police cadet training program that requires she stay in school. Her grades are now improving.

"When you see how all the teachers care about you and support you, it makes all the difference," Ms. Giorgio says.