OPTIMISTS often implore us to see the glass as being half-full. Yet only a full-fledged Pollyanna would find much to celebrate in a recent study issued by America's Promise Alliance.

The study, sponsored by the Alliance and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, found that only about half of public school students in the nation's largest cities are receiving high school diplomas. Think about it: Half of our children are being left behind.

For a country that prides itself on being a land of opportunity, offering millions of kids just a 50-50 chance of completing high school is a national disgrace. For a country that must compete in the modern global economy, the failure of our urban school systems puts the nation's future prosperity in peril.

The only appropriate emotions in response to a report like this one are equal measures of outrage and embarrassment. But already the partisans who dominate what passes for debate about education are dusting off their talking points. Take your pick: The high dropout rate is the fault of a damaged inner city culture that undervalues discipline and education. Or the product of a society that is indifferent, even hostile, to the needs and aspirations of poor people and people of color. Or it's schools dominated by teachers unions that lack any incentive to improve performance. Or maybe it's a bloated, top-heavy bureaucracy more interested in protecting their own positions than in educating our kids.

Whatever the partial truth of any of these explanations, this festival of finger pointing is a waste of time, and we have no time to waste. Rather than scoring political points, we must get on with the critical task of improving the education of the children who live in our cities.

This is not a pie-in-the-sky proposition. We actually know a lot about how to educate urban high school kids. We have done it successfully, and we need to learn from our successes and then repeat them on a large scale.

Take the Main South neighborhood of Worcester. It is, in many ways, quite similar to the largely poor and minority urban neighborhoods included in the America's Promise study. However, at Main South's University Park Campus School, the graduation rate is 100 percent, and more than 95 percent attend college.

University Park is a neighborhood public school. It does not screen out applicants with an entrance exam. Its student body is chosen by lottery from applicants who live in the neighborhood. It spends the same amount of public dollars per pupil as Worcester's other public high schools where more than one out of every three students drops out before graduation.

What explains the dramatic difference in outcomes?

A number of factors, none of them rocket science, combine to produce extraordinary results. University Park sets high standards and high expectations for every student. With just 230
students, the school is small, and class sizes are small as well. University Park begins in 7th
grade, giving kids two extra years to catch up from any educational deficit they arrive with.
Individual attention and tutoring are available to every student. The school also benefits from its
partnership with nearby Clark University, which sends college student volunteers into the school
and promises free college tuition for University Park students who graduate and meet Clark's
admissions standards.

University Park is not the only urban high school that is achieving uncommon results. There are
islands of high performance scattered throughout a sea of resignation and despair. These
successful schools are a challenge to every urban school board and to all of our federal and state
education agencies.

Some will claim that America cannot afford to provide this kind of education to all of our young
people. But they have it exactly backward.

What our country cannot afford is to condemn another generation of city kids to diminished life
chances and our society to all the loss of productivity and social costs that would surely follow.
Half measures will not suffice. It is time for us to make America's promise a reality for all of our
children.

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