

What It Takes: Chasing Graduation in High Poverty Schools

Transcript for Web

(APM Reports doc signature)

Stephen Smith: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary...

[School bell]

The high school graduation rate in the United States is at an all-time high. Still, 1 in 4 kids from low-income families don't finish.

Carlos Cruz: We got real life issues going on than you're A X plus B....

Roberto Guerra: No one ever asked me how my day was going. No one asked me if I was hungry or if my home situation was OK. No one asked, no one cared.

Ruth Richardson: Each student that comes in we're going to find a way to love 'em. And these students were not loved anywhere else.

Bethany Martinez: Like they want us to be something, and they believe in us.

Coming up, "What It Takes: Chasing Graduation at High Poverty High Schools."

Emily Hanford: It's early in the morning, it's just about 2 minutes past 6.

Stephen Smith: I'm Stephen Smith, and this is my colleague Emily Hanford.

Hanford: And I'm at Booker T Washington Senior High School in Miami.

Stephen Smith: Emily recorded this in her car, in the school parking lot.

Emily Hanford: I'm here early because teachers and the principal have all told me that lots of kids come to school early and stay late because this is a safe, good place for them to be compared to home and their neighborhoods.

Stephen Smith: Here's one of the stories Emily heard from a teacher. His name is Anthony Jennings.

Jennings: every morning when I would come in and open my classroom door I just had a sense that something was amiss. I couldn't tell exactly what it was. But I knew something wasn't right.

Emily Hanford: And then one morning when Mr. Jennings opened the door...

Jennings: I could see something move, just like a shadow or something, move across the room.

Stephen Smith: It could have been a frog. You sometimes see frogs in the classrooms and hallways here. But it wasn't a frog.

Jennings: There was a kid, who was camping out, who was using my room as a place to stay. And he had a family, but I guess every night the family would split up and everyone was responsible for finding their own place to stay or sleep.

[sound of car door opening]

Stephen Smith: Emily gets out of her car in the early morning light and walks into the school.

Emily Hanford: There are a couple of girls sitting on benches near the cafeteria.... and a security guard who's here to greet the early arrivals.

Preston: Hey La-La. Alright? OK....

Emily Hanford: This is Patricia Preston.

Preston: and I work at the T, Booker T, down here in Miami.

Emily Hanford: There's always a security guard here to open the school early. It's a little thing that can make a big difference at a school like this. The girls on the bench for example – Ms. Preston says they stay at the homeless shelter. There's a bus that brings students to school from the shelter, but these girls don't want to be seen on that bus.

Preston: So they won't be embarrassed, you know what I'm saying.

Stephen Smith: Booker T Washington Senior High School is in a neighborhood called Overtown. It's less than two miles from the restaurants and luxury condos of downtown Miami. But it's a long two miles. Nearly a third of families in Overtown live on less than \$15,000 a year.

(walkie-talkie)

Emily Hanford: It's almost 7 now, about 30 minutes until first period. Ms. Preston has her walkie-talkie in one hand. With the other hand she grabs a chair, plops it down at the middle of the school entrance, and gets ready to check IDs as students arrive. She decides to pull up some music on her phone. Her playlist is all 60s and 70s. The Jackson 5....

Preston: The whole Jackson clan when Michael used to be black.

And some Otis Redding....

Preston: *(singing along to The Dock of the Bay)*

Emily Hanford: Students are streaming in now. There are about a thousand of them here. Ms. Preston seems to know them all. Still, you gotta flash your ID... or you get a mouthful from Ms. Preston.

Preston: Geez, why we gotta go through this everyday? You all see me sitting here. This lady going to ask for my ID. You all don't see me, big as I be?

Stephen Smith Emily's been spending time at Booker T Washington because it's what's known as a high poverty school. That means more than 75 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced price meals. At Booker T, more than 90 percent of students fit into that category.

Emily Hanford: There's been a big rise in the percentage of schools like Booker T. One in four public schools in America is a high-poverty school. That's double what it was back in the late 1990s.

Stephen Smith: Going to a school where nearly all of your classmates are poor puts you at a huge disadvantage educationally, particularly when it comes to the most basic educational outcome - getting a high school diploma.

Emily Hanford: And a high school diploma is a bare minimum these days. If you don't graduate from high school, you're more likely to live in poverty, to be sick, to depend on government services, and to end up in prison. Without a high school diploma, you're even likely to die younger.

[MUSIC]

Stephen Smith: From APM Reports, this is "What It Takes – Chasing Graduation at High Poverty High Schools." In the United States, the high school graduation rate is at an all-time high.

Emily Hanford: More than 80 percent of students entering as freshmen get diplomas four years later. And if you're from a middle or upper income family, you have a 9 in 10 chance of graduating from high school.

Stephen Smith: But a stubborn and large contingent of students is not getting through. A quarter of kids from low-income families don't finish high school.

Emily Hanford: This hour we're going to look at what those kids are up against. And what it would take for schools to get more students to finish. We'll visit a school in California that literally chases students down to get them to class.

Stephen Smith: But first we're going back to Booker T Washington Senior High School in Miami to tell you about an experiment underway there to try to prevent kids from quitting school. Here's Emily with the story.

Emily Hanford: If you want to find the students most likely to drop out of high school, this is the place to look.

(sounds of Algebra 1 class)

Algebra 1. Ninth grade. More students fail Algebra 1 than any other class.

Teacher: Now do we think we put that minus 3 in my exponent or outside?

Student: Outside.

Teacher: Why outside?

(many kids answer)

In this Algebra class at Booker T, there's an eager bunch clearly getting it. But there's also a bunch who look confused, distracted, even a little pissed off.

Dominique: Math is, with me, it's a love and hate relationship. Because sometimes I understand it. Most times I don't.

That's Dominique. After the lesson, he joins a small group of students at the back of the classroom to get extra help from a tutor.

Tutor: It is F of X. What kind of function?

(whistle)

Students: negative, negative, positive...

Tutor: it's not negative...

Kids end up in this tutoring group because they're in danger of failing Algebra. And that's a big warning sign they may drop out.

Student: this is ridiculous....

Research shows you can predict with a remarkable degree of accuracy exactly who won't make it through high school by looking at three things: researchers call them the ABC's. Absences. Behavior. And Course performance. A ninth grader who comes to school less than 90% of the time, has two or more behavior infractions, and has a failing grade in a math or English class – that kid has a less than 25% chance of graduating from high school. The experiment underway at Booker T is to take all that predictive data, put it together, and see if you can use it to actually prevent a kid from quitting school.

Stauble: This is a list of every student who has in some period today been marked absent or tardy....

This is Maria Stauble. The list she has in her hand has about 200 names on it. That's 20 percent of the students at Booker T

(sound of door)

Stauble has an office at Booker T but she actually works for Johns Hopkins University.

Researchers there are heading up the dropout prevention experiment. They call the experiment Diplomas Now.

Stable: So I usually just sit right here....

Ms. Stable is sitting on a bench in the courtyard where students eat lunch. She's looking for kids who were marked absent but are actually here. Lunch is the place to find them because some kids show up just to eat. It might be the only meal they have today.

Stable: This kid was counted absent, let me look, yeah. Ransall – did you come late today?

Ransall: Yeah.

Stable: What happened?

Ransall says he woke up late. But a bunch of other students on this list, they're nowhere to be found.

Stable: A lot of these names are repeats, like every other day, every day.

After school, Ms. Stable's list ends up in the hands of a group of twenty-somethings.

Nicholson: Uh, my name is Kayla Nicholson. I'm going to make attendance phone calls...

Kayla is a volunteer for City Year. City Year is kind of like a domestic Peace Corps. Recent college graduates who spend a year in a high poverty school working as tutors and mentors. There are eight of them at Booker T as part of Diplomas Now. That tutoring you heard in Algebra? That was City Year. And at the end of the school day, the City Year team calls the parents of the 9th graders who never showed up today.

We're sorry, you have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer...

But they don't actually reach many parents.

The person you have called is unavailable right now...

They had more luck getting through at the beginning of the school year.

Nicholson: You know, at this point in the year people's numbers have changed or the numbers we have are disconnected

That's a sign of poverty right there. Middle-class parents – they'll have the same phone number for years. But when you're struggling to put food on the table, sometimes the phone bill just doesn't get paid.

City Year Volunteer: Hi is this the parent of Pedro?

The City Year team does get through to a handful of people. But it's not always the students' parent. In one case it's a guy who runs some kind of group home. In another it's an aunt. She says her nephew missed school because of the rain. The rain? Robert Balfanz, the Johns Hopkins researcher who helped design Diplomas Now, has heard this one before. On the one hand, he says, it sounds like a pretty lame excuse.

Balfanz: On the other hand, many kids don't have rain gear. They don't have umbrellas. If it's pouring out, it means they will be torrentially soaked. One of the greatest acts of grace I have ever seen in my life was at an inner city place, at a bus stop, it's torrential rain, there are kids there after school waiting for their bus, thoroughly soaked to the bone, somebody pulls up, opens up the back of their trunk, hands them an umbrella. And drives off. Because like, they just do not have rain gear. When you are in poverty, you don't have rain gear.

Balfanz says dropping out of high school is typically the result of many things that add up – little things like not having rain gear and big things like failing Algebra. Almost every student, rich or poor, runs into problems along the way in school. But when something goes wrong for a kid in a middle or upper income home, their families can typically help.

Balfanz: If a kid is struggling, they can get em a psychologist, they can get em a tutor, they can have their uncle that was off the hook and then recovered talk to them and

help them figure out how to do it. In high poverty environments, those supports aren't available, and if a school doesn't provide them, they don't get provided.

The idea at the heart of the dropout prevention experiment at Booker T is to identify the students who are having problems and deliver solutions – before a bunch of unsolved stuff leads to a kid quitting school.

Stauble: I just want to start by thanking you guys for coming....

This is Maria Stauble again, the one who was checking attendance at lunch. She also runs this weekly meeting. Teachers and staff get together to talk about the 9th graders who are struggling.

Stauble: So up here is her total absences for last year ...

(staff reacts)

Ms. Stauble has prepared a PowerPoint with information about each student. The information comes from something called the Early Warning Indicator system. Researchers built it to collect all the data about a student's absences, behavior and course performance in one place. When you put it all together like that, you can see, right there in the data, that some kids are basically raising their hands and saying "I'm in trouble, someone help me."

Stable: like the first thing that stands out to me is that her grades have significantly dropped from having straight Cs last year to this year.

The student they're talking about now – we'll call her Daniela to protect her identity -- she's failing Algebra, science and English.

Stable: We have a couple of her teachers if you all just want to jump in...

Briano: I can start, she started off the first 9 weeks – I wouldn't say strong, but decent.

Um, there was at least effort there....

But now it's the middle of the school year and when Daniela does come to class, she mostly just sits there, doing nothing. She doesn't even bring a backpack.

Young: She just sounds so uninterested in school. Period. That's what she told me. She's like, I don't want to be here, I don't want to do anything, I don't, just, like, nothing. Arms crossed.

One of the staff members says Daniela covers her mouth a lot, maybe she has some kind of dental problem? Another says Daniela's clothes are often stained and smelly.

Briano: I think that there's something going on at home, or something not going on at home...

So, what can they do for Daniela? There aren't obvious answers. They've got other kids with big problems too. A student who missed a couple months of school because he apparently hit his mom – or maybe stabbed her – and was locked up or in some kind of rehab. And another student who's a 17-year old ninth grader.

Just because you can identify who's at risk of dropping out, doesn't mean you can figure out what to do about it. What they come up with is tutoring for one student, special ed testing for another – and a home visit for Daniela, the girl with dirty clothes and no backpack.

Burgess: OK, so I'm going to take you through the back way....

We're not on our way to a home visit. The school wouldn't let me. Instead I'm getting a tour of the neighborhood where Daniela and many of the students at this school live. My guide is Diane Burgess. She's an instructional coach at Booker T.

Burgess: Here we turning on 10th street, and this taking you into an area that we call swamp...

One of the first things you notice about Overtown is the big bridge that cuts through the middle of the neighborhood. It's interstate 95. And under the I-95 bridge are homeless people and drug addicts, living in tents, sleeping on the sidewalks.

Burgess: we could get out and walk

Hanford: OK

We walk through the neighborhood, past housing projects, vacant lots and a corner store that advertises free ice when you buy liquor.

Burgess: What's up! How are you?

Ms. Burgess seems to know everyone here. Even the driver of the bus that passes us ...

Burgess: Oh my God! How are you?

Ms. Burgess grew up in Overtown. She doesn't live here now because --- this is the kind of neighborhood people leave once they get an education. On our walk, Ms. Burgess points out several places where people in the neighborhood have been shot and killed.

Burgess: And our kids talk about that. They see it, they talk it, they talk about it, they come back to school, depressed, they sad....

[Cock a doodle doo]

Yes, that was a rooster. They're everywhere here in Overtown ... just running around on the sidewalks. I ask Ms. Burgess why.

Burgess: What they said about roosters. Roosters supposed to bring you good luck.

That's what they say. That if you have a rooster in your yard, that's supposed to bring you good fortune. I don't know how true that is.

Roosters don't seem to be bringing much luck to this neighborhood. But it wasn't always like this here. Overtown was once a thriving place.

[Archival music]

This is New Year's Eve 1955. Black musicians performing on Miami Beach. When they were done, they couldn't stay at the Miami Beach hotels. Because of segregation. So, they stayed in Overtown.

Fields: And we had five hotels right here.

This is Dr. Dorothy Jenkins Fields, an archivist and historian who grew up in Overtown. We're sitting in the visitor's center of the historic Lyric Theatre, a building in Overtown that Fields helped save from demolition. It's the middle of the afternoon.

Fields: And about this time of day we would see Ella Fitzgerald, Bojangles, Smokey Robinson...

They'd be out in the neighborhood when she and her friends got out of school. Fields went to Booker T, class of 1960.

Fields: You'd see them walking around, going to the restaurants, and there were restaurants here. And not fast food restaurants. These were linen table cloths and napkins and all of that. And so you'd stop them in the street and they'd say hello.

They'd even visit Booker T. Give performances. Nat King Cole gave piano lessons there.

Fields: Yes, he did (*laughs*)

It's hard to overestimate how important Booker T Washington Senior High School was to this community. It was the first public high school for black students in all of south Florida. Built in 1926. Kids came from all over to go to Booker. T One teacher told me his great grandfather, who was apparently a rum runner, brought his granddaughters by boat from Key West every week so they could go to high school.

Pinkney: This was a very outstanding school.

This is Enid Pinkney, Booker T graduating class of 1949.

Pinkney: People don't understand. They think that because we went to school during the days of segregation that we had an inferior education. But it has not turned out that way for me.

It didn't turn out that way for her friend Agnes Morton either. Class of 1955.

Morton: It was expected that we would achieve academic excellence here. And we had extracurricular activities and all the stuff we wanted to. And we were exposed to so many people. Our choir used to sing every year at the Jewish Center.

Ms. Morton and Ms. Pinkney tell me Booker T has a school song.

Hanford: Ooh, how do you sing the song?

Pinkney & Morton: (singing) This is our school. Our source of inspiration....

They're singing this in the main office of Booker T, after school on a Friday. They're dressed all in white because that's what they wear for their reunions. And tonight is their reunion. Booker T has an active alumni association that raises tens of thousands of dollars for college scholarships every year. This school is still the pride of Overtown.

Pinkney & Morton: (singing)... though art our school, praises are thine (giggle)

It's clear from talking to alums that Booker T provided them what they considered a great education, got many of them into college, put them on a solid path to middle-class lives. But by the early 2000s, things had changed. Education researchers labelled Booker T a "dropout factory." In 2003, more than 70 percent of the students at Booker T weren't graduating. Think about that: 10 students started. Three of them finished. How did things get so bad at the school? A lot of it has to do with how the neighborhood changed. And those changes began with the construction of I-95.

News archive: The biggest link in the whole expressway plan is the north south expressway....

This is from a 1960 television documentary explaining plans to build 95 right through the middle of Overtown.

News archive: This is the road we've been waiting for, one that will eventually take us all the way from the end of the Sunshine State Parkway down to and through the central business area of Miami...

The construction of interstate 95 was hailed as a great moment of urban renewal. But for many people here, urban renewal was just another name for white people wiping out a black neighborhood.

Fields: It destroyed the community.

This is Dr. Fields again. To make way for 95, thousands of homes and businesses in Overtown were demolished. Silent film footage from 1966 shows the mayor of Miami-Dade County operating the wrecking ball that destroys a building, while dozens of black children watch from a nearby balcony. Another thing that happened in the 1960s? Desegregation. That meant the middle class in Overtown could leave. And they did. And Booker T - it became a school full of kids from poor families.

[Knock knock]

I'm back at Booker T. And I'm knocking on the office door of the person here who may know as well as anyone what a school is up against when so many of its students live in poverty.

Mena: My name is Karla Mena and I work with Communities in Schools.

Remember the Diplomas Now experiment going on at Booker T? To see if all that predictive data about who is likely to drop out can be used to actually prevent students from quitting. Communities in Schools is the third part of that experiment. First part is the research from Johns Hopkins. Second part is the tutoring and mentoring from City Year. Third part – Ms. Mena. Her job is to help students with the things going on in their lives outside of school that can make doing well in school difficult.

Mena: OK, so great job with that. I know that you were asking for a bus pass.

Lopez: Umm-hmmm...

Ms. Mena can hook students up with things like housing assistance, therapists, and food. Today she's meeting with a 12th grader named Stephany Lopez. Stephany is one of her regulars.

Mena: Have you been able to go see the therapist I recommended?

Lopez: Yeah, like last weekend there was....

Stephany's got a lot going on in her life. Her family's homeless, living in a motel. Her mom has mental health issues. Her stepdad can be violent. Stephany wants to go live with a family friend. But...

Lopez: I'm worried about my mom. Because I don't know what can happen when I am gone...

She's also worried about her little sister. It's Stephany who makes sure she gets to school every day. But despite all the stuff going on in her life, Stephany is doing well in school.

Lopez: I want to show her my grades

She takes out her report card.

Mena: OK, they're fantastic. Everything here is B and A. There's no Ds, there's no F.

Things weren't always like this. Back in 9th grade, Stephany was one of those kids starting to light up the Early Warning Indicator system. So she got help as part of Diplomas Now -- tutoring from City Year and assistance from Communities in Schools. I ask Stephany -- what are some of the specific ways Ms. Mena has helped her?

Lopez: She was there to help me when I was very hungry. She was able to feed me.

When, like, when I was in pain, like for example, having my personal things of the month, she was there to help me.

She's talking about tampons. Not being able to afford tampons is the kind of thing that can keep a teenage girl out of school. Ms. Mena's office is full of stuff that kids in poverty need -- donated school supplies, back packs, shampoo, even sunglasses. And on the wall of her office a big poster that says: "Don't stop until you graduate." I ask Stephany what's kept her going in school.

Lopez: Because what I ever wanted is to be happy.

And she says she's learned that to be happy, you have to get an education.

Lopez: Uh-huh. Get an education because if you're not then you're like set back and you're just going to be like any type of person who's living under a bridge. And I don't want that.

Stephany will be graduating next month. Her plan is to go to college and become an occupational therapist. She's one of the students the Diplomas Now program seems to have helped. But it hasn't helped everyone.

Mena: I'm Briknic Mena. I used to go to Booker T Washington Senior High School.

Briknic's one of the students who didn't make it, despite the efforts of Diplomas Now. The guy who introduced me to Briknic is Derrick Moore. He ran the Diplomas Now Program at Booker T for nearly five years before being moved to another Miami high school. I meet up with him and Briknic at Booker T.

We walk the halls, Briknic says hello to a few of her former teachers.

[Greetings]

Then we head to Mr. Moore's old office for a quiet place to talk.

Mena: He used to always make sure I was in school. Ha, ha, ha. *(Derrick laughs)* In a way it did motivate me to come. But school was a little bit too overwhelming, especially at that time period.

Briknic tells me she was kicked out of Booker T last year, when she was 16, because she had basically stopped coming to school. I ask why but Briknic seems reluctant to talk much about her own situation. Instead she talks in generalities about the challenges kids in her community face. Finally, Mr. Moore nudges her to be more specific.

Moore: Talk about some personal things.

Mena: As far as what? I don't want to get too personal.

Moore: No, it's all good. Just want to give a real snapshot of what it's really like, what it is, what you experience on a day to day basis, some of the things at home or in the community that you might have seen that might have, you know, not been so supportive of education. Or, you know.

Still a bit reluctant, Briknic starts talking about all the people she's known who've been killed.

Mr. Moore asks her to talk about one death in particular – her friend Izzy.

Moore: and how did that affect you? Cause you were still coming to school at that time.

Izzy. So talk a little bit about that. What happened? How it affected you?

Briknic: Oh, just not wanting to be there. Just rebelling. Not wanting to be in class. It affects all of that. You don't want to be coped down. When you're going through all these things and all these emotions that you don't know how to handle it and you're still a child. You're 15, 14, we're still growing. We're still in the process of life and we're going through all these things that we don't know how to cope with it. And we don't

understand what to do. Briknic says she hasn't given up on education. She was taking a GED class. But a few months ago, she stopped going - because she got shot, in the leg. She still has a limp. Despite that, Briknic actually walked more than a mile to the school for our interview today. To spare her the walk home, Mr. Moore offers to give her a ride.

(getting in car)

We get in the car and drive to Little Havana, a neighborhood next to Overtown where Briknic and many Booker T students live. As we drive, Briknic points out all the drug dealers on the streets. And the addicts. Several of them are white. They're the only white people I see here.

Briknic: alrighty, it was a pleasure meeting you

Emily: pleasure, thank you

We get to Briknic's apartment, where she lives with her mom, her sister and her brothers.

Moore: holler at me

Briknic: alright Mr. Moore

(door slams)

As Derrick Moore and I drive back to Booker T, I ask him whether he thinks the school failed Briknic. He says there's only so much schools can do. He thinks people outside schools need to start taking more responsibility for what's going on in poor communities.

Moore: It's bigger than just schools, it's bigger than those individuals who are calling the shots from an educational perspective. I think it's the local government, our commissioners in this area, people who can ultimately affect the communities. Something needs to be done from their end.

When Mr. Moore and I get back to Booker T, he gets a text that underscores his point. It's from Briknic. The text says that right after we dropped her off at home, her mother told her the family was being evicted. She doesn't know where they're going to go.

[MUSIC]

The Diplomas Now experiment at Booker T is over. It was a five year-year program that just ended. There were dozens of other high poverty schools involved in the experiment, and researchers are still collecting and analyzing data. The evidence so far is mixed. It suggests that Diplomas Now did have an impact on the number of students in a school who ended up having none of those early warning indicators that predicted they would drop out. In other words, students in the Diplomas Now schools were less likely than students in similar schools to get off track when it came to their absences, their behavior and their course performance. But the Diplomas Now program – according to the data so far - did not seem to have an impact on students who came into high school already in trouble. In other words, if a student started high school already behind academically, already with behavior issues, already with a history of

chronic absenteeism – the Diplomas Now program didn't seem to help them get back on track. So what does help those students? And how do you help kids who have already dropped out? Those are questions we tackle next.

[MUSIC]

Stephen Smith: You're listening to an APM Reports documentary - "What It Takes: Chasing Graduation at High Poverty High Schools." I'm Stephen Smith.

Emily Hanford: And I'm Emily Hanford. As we told you at the beginning of this program, there's been a big rise in the number of schools like Booker T – schools where the majority of students are from low-income families.

Stephen Smith: And the students who go to these schools are mostly kids of color. Nearly *half* of all black and Hispanic students in the United States go to a high-poverty school. In contrast, only 8 percent of white students are in schools where most of their classmates are low income.

Emily Hanford: This systemic isolation of students by race and class is a huge obstacle when it comes to closing educational achievement gaps. Research shows the percentage of a student's schoolmates who are poor is a strong predictor of academic achievement, even after accounting for a child's own family income and socioeconomic status.

Stephen Smith: America once tried to close achievement gaps by de-segregating public schools. But the country has largely turned its back on de-segregation. Public schools in the United States are more racially segregated now than they were in the 1970s. And the percentage of schools where almost all of the students are black or Hispanic *and* poor has nearly doubled in the past 15 years.

Stephen Smith: From American Public Media, this is an APM Reports documentary, “What It Takes – Chasing Graduation at High Poverty High Schools.” I’m Stephen Smith.

Emily Hanford: And I’m Emily Hanford.

[getting in the car, radio on...]

It’s early morning – again. But this time I’m in Pasadena, California. And I’m getting into a purple car with this guy.

Correy: I am Dominick Correy, a chaser at Learning Works charter school and we’re getting ready to go out and chase these students to come to school today.

Navigation: starting route to

The first student on the list for pick up this morning is Brian.

Correy: 20 years old, I think, like 20 years old. Tattoos on his head and stuff like that. But he lives in his enemy territory so he doesn't catch the bus because he could get killed catching the bus trying to come to school.

Navigation system: "arrived"

[Door opens]

Hanford: Hi Brian, I'm Emily

The next student on our list is Mario.

Correy: He hasn't been here in maybe like 3 weeks. He'll come in regularly, then fall off the face of earth and come back in. And last year with Mario I had leverage because he was on probation....

Coming to school was a condition of his probation. But now that he's off, it's hard to motivate him.

(sound of Mario getting in)

Mario gets in the car.

Hanford: what are you going in to school to do today?

Mario: do some work, probably some Algebra, maybe a little bit of literature

After we get Mario, it's Kenneth.

Phone ring

We're at Kenneth's house. He's supposed to be outside. But he's not, so Dominick calls. A woman answers and when Dominick says he's here to bring Kenneth to school, she sounds thrilled. Sends Kenneth out.

(sound of Kenneth getting in car)

Kenneth just started at Learning Works two weeks ago. He's 18. Says he hadn't been in school for two years.

Hanford: so you think this is going to work for you?

Kenneth: This school?

Hanford: Yeah.

Kenneth: I have a lot of credits to go, but I think so.

Hanford: How much longer do you think you need to do?

Kenneth: I need like maybe 150 credits.

Hanford: So that's a lot, you need 180 total, right?

Kenneth: Yeah.

(flipping through radio stations)

If Kenneth went to a traditional high school, he'd be at least 21 by the time he could graduate. And frankly, a traditional high school doesn't want a student like Kenneth. Too much of a chance you'll enroll him, he'll quit, and that'll count against your graduation rate. But Learning Works is all about students like Kenneth.

Correy: That's the one thing about Learning Works, we take everybody.

Correy: We're going to do whatever it's going to take to get them to graduate.
Whatever it's going to take.

(music ends abruptly, engine off, sound of getting out of car)

Stephen Smith: Emily, Dominick and the students have arrived at Learning Works.

Emily Hanford: Dominick parks the purple chaser mobile next to another purple chaser mobile. On the back of each car in big white letters it says: High School Dropout? And there's the school phone number.

Stephen Smith: Learning Works was started ten years ago by an education researcher named Mikala Rahn.

Rahn: OK, well why I started school was because traditional systems can't really work with dropouts.

Emily Hanford: She was seeing it in her research. The graduation rate going up, but this stubborn 20 or 30 percent of students who weren't finishing.

Rahn: We've created a system for the masses. And we don't know what to do with the fringes.

Emily Hanford: Learning Works is a public charter school specially made for the students that traditional high school doesn't work for. Like at Booker T, virtually all of the students are kids of color from low-income families.

Stephen Smith: And while the students at Learning Works may in some ways represent the fringes, the challenges they face are challenges a growing number of low-income kids in America confront every day. Emily continues our story.

Emily Hanford: First, I want to talk about the word dropout. It's written on those purple chaser cars. Researchers and policymakers use it all the time. But ask the students at Learning Works what they think of that word?

Snyder: I don't like the term dropout.

That's Markas Snyder.

Walker: I don't like it.

This is Camaree Walker.

Walker: It just seems kind of like no hope for the student. That's kind of like what that word means to me.

So, I'm not going to use it anymore. Partly because the students don't like it, but also because it's not really accurate. Makes it sound like some kind of decision kids make when it's really more of a process that begins in middle school or even earlier. Plus, a lot of students get kicked out. That's what Camaree says happened to him.

Walker: I um, had all bad grades and just talking crap to all the teachers and starting fights with other students and just being a class clown.

Looking back, he thinks he probably deserved to be expelled. Other students at Learning Works told me they don't blame schools for getting rid of them either but also, they say traditional schools didn't give them what they needed. Here's Roberto Guerra.

Guerra: When I was in regular school, I never met my counselor, no one ever asked how my day was going. No one asked if I was hungry or if my home situation was OK. No one asked, no one cared. And here it's not like that When you walk in, everyone is saying hi. Shaking your hand. Everyone is asking questions.

[Scene: You look gorgeous. Hi guys]

Guerra: And that's why it works, cause you're not just walking alone...

[Scene: And Michala– what are you working on?]

We're at Learning Works in what's known as "the warehouse." It's a big open space with tables. At the end of each table is a teacher's desk. Every student is assigned a teacher. And every teacher has a chaser.

Martinez: The chasers and stuff, they also were f**k ups. I'm sorry, excuse my language.

This is a student named Bethany Martinez. She's talking about the fact that the chasers here – all of them quit high school, or got kicked out, or went to jail, or otherwise didn't make it in a traditional school.

Martinez: So they understand us, you know. Like, they know where we're from. They know like how we are and they know like our situations. You know what I mean. So it's like they want us to be something. And they believe in us. And people like us, like the kids here, we need that. We don't have really anything. Like when we're on the streets, it's just us. But when we're here, it's all of us.

[Scene: Good morning Pearla]

Bethany's chaser is Roberto. You heard him a moment ago, talking about what regular school was like for him. Roberto is a Learning Works graduate. The teacher he chases for is Ruth Richardson.

Richardson: Each student that comes in, we're going to find a way to love em. And these students were not loved anywhere else.

Richardson: OK, is anybody new to the class today? You guys have all been here before. You're all veterans. So you know we've got a lot to cover in a very little time....

Here's how this place works. Each teacher has about 30 students, works with them one-on-one in English, social studies, whatever subjects the student needs. Students also have to attend some actual classes. Each teacher specializes in a few subject areas. Ruth does art, math and physics.

Richardson: You guys all see this? It's a magnet. These are coils of wire. And this measures electricity....

We're in a back corner of the warehouse. There's a white board and a few tables strewn with physics textbooks. There were 10 students here when class started. Then a couple of chaser mobiles arrived and now there are 16 students. Late like that in a traditional school and you're in trouble. But this school is all about flexibility.

Richardson: If they don't show up for 3 weeks, we can still put an intense week in and get them caught up.

Learning Works is not about requiring students to sit in their seats for a certain amount of time every day. It's about helping students get the work done, when they can, how they can.

Richardson: OK, so this, oh, and that's module 5. I love it when module fives get done...

Ruth is back at her desk. A small crowd of students surrounds her. There are about 400 of them enrolled at this school - that includes students at a second Learning Works location in LA. On

any given day, maybe a third of the students show up. Students work their way through “modules.” Each module is akin to a credit. For each module, you do some reading, some work in a textbook, attend a certain number of classes. You might also have a science lab or a field trip. There are lots of field trips here. To the theatre, museums, the zoo – places kids in poverty almost never go. At the end of each module, students do some kind of project.

Richardson: and what do you think the government should do about Satan worshippers?

Student: I don’t know, they could do whatever they want.

Richardson: But if freedom of religion applies to Catholics....

This is Ruth working with a student on a project about the First Amendment. The student has to come up with questions and then poll his peers about their beliefs.

Richardson: so you have to think of two more questions....

Student: alright

Learning Works exists by virtue of a provision in California law that allows students to do something called “independent study.” That provision was not at all designed for the students who are here. Founder Mikala Rahn says it was designed for...

Rahn: Actors, actresses, people who are sick in the hospital.

In other words, students whose schedules or life circumstances make traditional school impossible. Well, for kids in poverty, traditional school can be impossible too. Take this student.

Mendez: (laughs) I am Viridiana Mendez.

Vidi for short. She works full time at a restaurant. Her schedule changes a lot. And – she *has* to work. Her parents left the country when she was 14.

Mendez: I do miss them. And it's hard. It's hard to like, grow up without someone being there with you.

She lives with her brothers. Her parents are in Mexico. They're trying to return to the United States. One of the reasons Vidi works so much? She's helping to pay for her parents' immigration lawyer.

Lugo: Well, my name's Edward Lugo.

Edward is another student who couldn't make it in traditional school.

Lugo: Ah, I've been going to Learning Works for about like 4 years now. Going on five.

Edward is 19, determined to get a high school diploma before he turns 20. He lives with his great grandma, but she can't provide much more than a place to live.

Lugo: I earn everything I get on my own. Like, no one buys me my laundry soap, no one does my laundry. No one, you know? It's like I'm an adult now. I have to support myself in every single way.

And another student whose life just didn't fit with traditional school...

Luquin: Well, I'm Ana Luquin, a future graduate.

Ana's mother left her when she was a baby. Like, left her home alone - as an infant. Social services took over. Ana's been in foster homes, the juvenile justice system. And lots of schools.

Hanford: so how many schools have you been to?

Luquin: Like, 20, 30.

Hanford: 20 or thirty schools?

Luquin: Like 30, yeah.

Ana's goal is to go to college and study psychology. Before she came to Learning Works, she says she didn't think much about her future. But she says this place has taught her to care.

Luquin: Yeah

Hanford: What do you mean by that?

Luquin: Like it gave me hope. Like, like before I came here, I had no purpose. Now I have a purpose.

Hanford: huh....

Students at Learning Works come from schools all over the Los Angeles metropolitan area, including really good schools like the ones here in affluent Pasadena. One of the reasons Mikala Rahn started Learning Works is that she was so pissed off that high schools let so many students fall through the cracks. But what she's learned is that traditional schools really can't give kids in poverty what they need.

Rahn: Like regular school districts don't do 24 /7. Like, how would that work?

But 24/7 is what Learning Works is all about. Chasers show up at student's homes when they're being evicted, when their boyfriend hits them, when their cousin gets shot. Chasers also take students to doctor's appointments, drive them to job interviews, bring them their school work when they're sick. All things middle-class parents do for their kids all the time. But if there's one thing almost all of the students here have in common it's this: their parents are not very involved in their lives. Parents might literally be missing – they're in prison, or deported, or dead. They might be working two or three jobs. Or they might not be there emotionally – because of their own troubled childhoods, or addiction, or mental illness, or just the stress of poverty.

Walker: I hate living with my mom. It's just nothing but just negativity when I go home.

This is Camaree again. The student who thought he deserved to be kicked out of school. When I ask him about his mom he shifts around in his chair and clears his throat a lot.

Walker: It's kind of hard going back home (throat clear), and hearing like stuff, just like arguing all the time and self-doubt. Like when I go home I feel self-doubt all the time and I just....

Camaree pauses ... and says something that I've thought about so many times since.

Walker: Mother is just a title, I guess. That's what I've learned.

Mother is just a title.

Walker: And that's all I see her as. As just a person with just the title of a mother.

Camaree says when you don't get support at home, plus you don't always know where your next meal is coming from – you end up feeling hopeless.

Walker: It's hard to find hope when there's like no hope sitting at the table. And I think that's why a lot of kids don't graduate because they just give up and they think that,

maybe I was meant for like, a bad life. Maybe I was meant to be a gang member. Maybe I was meant to like, not go to school or go to college. Because my family members didn't. So maybe that's why a lot of kids didn't want to graduate. I don't know. Everybody has their story.

(scene) **Lugo:** So it's just going to be $x^2 - b^2$, or $x^2 - a^2$ squared?

We're back in the warehouse again where Edward is working with a tutor. Edward's the student who lives with his great grandma, determined to graduate this year... but having a hard time getting through his final math credits.

Tutor: That's the difference of squares and that will always be like that

Lugo: OK – where am I going to use this in my life?

Tutor: Umm, you're going to use it in 10, 11, 12...

(laughing)

This is the kind of question teachers everywhere get asked all the time – why do I need to learn this? It can be a tough one to answer. But here's the thing: if you're a kid in an educated family, in a good school, in a middle-class neighborhood – you see the benefits of education all around you. It may be hard to figure out exactly why you need to learn this formula or that equation, but the whole enterprise generally adds up: do well in school and it leads to a better life. But

when you're struggling to survive, having to master something like the difference of squares. It can just feel so irrelevant.

Cruz: We got rent due, we got lights to pay. We got real life issues going on, than you're a x plus b equals MC ... You know, like none of that means anything. Like, basic math can get you by on the streets. You just need to know how to count your money.

This is Carlos Cruz. He was one of founder Mikala Rahn's first graduates.

Hanford: do you think you could have made it through traditional high school eventually?

Cruz: Yeah, if Mikala was my mom, yeah of course. I'd be at f**in, at Harvard right now. If I had two parents that were educated and you know. You are a product of your environment. That statement doesn't get any realer.

(scene) **Walker:** yes? Do you want lunch?

Boy: what is that?

Walker: It's soup...

This is Camaree again. I'm with him in the storage room at Learning Works that doubles as the library and the snack bar.

Girl: Um, can I get a Gatorade or whatever?

Walker: Powerade

Girl: Yeah, Powerade....

Walker: What color?

Girl: A blue one...

Camaree graduated from Learning Works last year. Wasn't ready to completely leave this place so he got this job running the snack bar. In between customers, he's working on a paper for his college English class. Camaree is in his second semester at Pasadena Community College. First time I met him, several months ago, he had just started college. And things weren't going that well. Here he is, back then.

Walker: Like, a lot of people were trying to force me to go to college after I graduated.

Um, I just thought that college wasn't for me. I still think college isn't for me, even though I am going there.

He was taking an African-American history class and it was really hard. He had just dropped it.

Walker: The way that the professor was talking, he was talking like words I didn't even understand.

He says he felt stupid. But this semester, things are going better. Much better.

Hanford: so do you feel like you're on your way to learning, like would you be able to take that class in a couple of years?

Walker: Oh yeah, next semester, I'm taking that class again. Cause I've actually learned some new words. So I think I would be OK in that class. So, yeah.

It would be ideal to get every Learning Works graduate to go to college like Camaree. When it comes to getting on a path to a middle-class life, post-secondary education is where it's at. In the United States, forty-five percent of people born into poverty remain in poverty. But with a college degree, that rate plummets to 16 percent. Mikala Rahn says she originally thought all of her graduates would go on to higher education. She's come to the conclusion, though, that it may not be realistic for everyone. And she's learned to measure success in other ways. She brings up the example of one of her first students, Brian. He had every problem, every challenge. But he got a high school diploma.

Rahn: Someone like Brian isn't dead and isn't serving life. That was not where we were at 15 years old. I never would've thought those words would have even come out of my mouth.

Hanford: What words?

Rahn: That he's not dead, he's not in jail. And that's great.

(Scene) **Correy:** Quiet on set, quiet on set, we're going live. Nah, I'm, just playing
(laughs)

This is Dominick Correy again. He's kidding around with his fellow chasers as they get ready to do their alumni survey. Every year, they call all of their graduates to see how they're doing.

(phone ring)

Correy: Twin, what up? This is Dominick.

Twin: Oh, what's up Dominick?

Correy: What up man, how you been?

The chasers ask their graduates a series of questions. Are you working? On government assistance? Do you own a car? The school tallies up the responses and the data show that more than sixty percent of Learning Works graduates are working, most of them full time. Ten percent report receiving government assistance. And just three percent are in prison even though about a third were involved in the criminal justice system at some point while they were students. There's no way to calculate an official graduation rate the way traditional high schools do so it's hard to know exactly how effective Learning Works is on that count. There are certainly kids who start here and don't make it. But the students who do finish – several of them told me that without this school, they're pretty sure they would have never gotten a high school diploma.

(tap on mic) **Correy:** Good evening, good evening, good evening. I want to welcome everybody to Learning Works Charter school 2016 graduation....

(pomp and circumstance)

There are 66 students graduating today. Their caps and gowns are purple, just like the chaser mobiles. Among the graduates is Edward Lugo. He made it through his final math credits, and is getting his diploma just a few weeks shy of his 20th birthday. Another graduate – Ana Luquin, the student who went to 30 schools before finding Learning Works. Someone who had hoped to be here today but hasn't quite completed enough credits yet is Vidi Mendez. She's the student who was working to pay for her parent's immigration lawyer. The big news with Vidi is that she's living with her parents again. They're back from Mexico. And Vidi expects to be ready to graduate in a few months.

Martinez: OK, bear with me...

And one of the students we met earlier is a speaker at today's graduation -- Bethany Martinez, the one who was talking about how important the chasers are because they understand what life is like for kids like her.

Martinez: Friends, chasers, teachers and families – we are finally graduating! Can you guys believe it?

A few months ago, it was not at all clear Bethany was going to make it to this stage today. She wasn't coming to school much. Had some housing issues, some problems with her boyfriend. And then she found out she was pregnant. Her baby girl is due next month.

Martinez: (gasp) A lot of my own friends and family doubted me. They didn't think I could walk across this stage ever. But with the help of my nagging chaser Rob and favorite teacher Ruth, they made this day possible. You made me believe that I will graduate. Really I had no choice, you guys never left me alone. So as much as I complained about it, thank you....

(Applause)

Learning Works founder Mikala Rahn says she's often asked if she'd be willing to open up more schools. She says no. It's just not something she personally wants to do. She does think some elements of the model could be copied. The chasers, the flexible scheduling. She points out that it doesn't cost more to run a school like Learning Works. You just have to use money differently – chasers instead of a football team, for example. Learning Works does do some outside fundraising – roughly \$100,000 a year – to pay for things like shoes for homeless students and even funerals for students who are killed. There could be more schools like Learning Works – you'd just have to find people willing to make them happen.

Correy: Once again, congratulations class of 2016. Everybody stand up, parents, meet them outside. Congratulations, you guys are done. Follow out, follow out..

[Music]

There are educators and researchers who say the best solution for some kids in poverty might be a boarding school of some kind, to get them away from their troubled neighborhoods. Students at Learning Works have been known to crash on their teachers' couches when they needed a safe place to stay... and Mikala Rahn often has at least one student living with her and her husband and two children. Stability, support, a family that can provide – those are the most basic things that every kid needs. And without those things, succeeding in school can be really, really hard.

[Music]

Stephen Smith: You've been listening to "What It Takes: Chasing Graduation at High-Poverty High Schools" from APM Reports. It was produced by Emily Hanford and edited by Catherine Winter. The web editor is Dave Peters. The web producer is Andy Kruse. Research and production help from Alex Baumhardt and Lila Cherneff. Mixing by Craig Thorson. Special thanks to Liz Lyon, Dylan Peers McCoy, and the Wolfson Archives at Miami-Dade College. The APM Reports team includes Ryan Katz, Samara Freemark, Suzanne Pekow, Sasha Aslanian, Ellen Guettler, Chris Worthington and me, Stephen Smith.

We have more about this story on our website – [APM Reports dot org](http://APMReports.org). You can find data on the growth of high poverty schools and see photos of the students and chasers at Learning Works.

It's all at [APM Reports dot org](http://APMReports.org)... where you can sign up for Educate, our weekly education podcast.

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