



Expectation Graduation

The Reach Out to Dropouts Walk

2008



Overview

“There are a lot of smiles on Walk Day. Kids smile when they see us standing there on a Saturday morning. Parents smile when their kids go back to school. Volunteers smile because they can see they are making a difference.”

*—Mayor Bill White,
Houston, Texas*

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. Volunteers, including the Mayor of Houston, other elected officials, and the Superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, have personally knocked on the doors of students who did not return to school in the fall in an effort to convince them to come back.

The annual Walk is held approximately two weeks after the beginning of the school year. It is vital to reclaim these students before they get further behind and weighed down by a sense of never being able to catch up. Personal visits from volunteers on Walk day have proven to be an innovative and effective way to persuade students that it is in their best interests to complete high school.

Learning About Student Needs

The Walk has also provided City and school district officials and administrators, and community leaders, with a better understanding of the issues and roadblocks that confront many of the students who have left school. Through this increased awareness, the City, school districts, and wider community are doing a better job of responding to student needs and crafting solutions that enable their return to school.

Expansion of Walk

Over the past few years, the Walk has grown from three 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 in additional districts. School officials from other cities and states have participated in the Walk and expressed strong interest in replicating this program.

As the Walk has grown, so have the community-business-government partnerships that support it. These partnerships are vital to the success of the initiative in every capacity. The support generated from these partnerships helps alleviate the burdens of funding, builds awareness, improves media relations, facilitates public relations efforts; and creates an energy that in turn brings new partners and supporters on board.



Getting Started

Reach Out to Dropouts is a very effective program; it's 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 have been added each year, from refreshments and T-shirts for walkers to banners and pencils promoting the event, the most important thing is the knock on the door from a caring volunteer.

Deciding to Participate

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

Roles

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

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.

Building Your Team

The Walk is a great way to share resources and foster collaboration among 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

Volunteers play a key role before the Walk and throughout Walk day. All volunteers must be 18 and should commit to attending **training**.

In just four 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. Comments from students, area educators, and community partners are the best evidence of the positive affect of the program. Business volunteer Kris Hines recalls 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 that 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.”

Pre-Walk Activity

Prior to the Walk, volunteers make phone calls to students who have not returned to school after the first five days, using a list provided by the school. Volunteers gather information about why the students did not return, such as enrolling in another school, moving away, starting a GED program, or having become pregnant. Volunteers also attempt to collect new contact information on students. Student records are then updated for use by the school and for volunteers on Walk day.

On Walk Day, volunteers go out in teams in an effort to personally contact their assigned students and hopefully convince them to come back to school.

Scripts should be provided for volunteers to use for their **phone calls** and **home visits**. Scripts should be translated into the necessary languages. The overriding message should reinforce that students are welcome back at school.

Recruiting

The best place to look for volunteers is within your own schools and school districts. Many of the staff, teachers, and members of parent organizations are willing to join in this effort to bring students back to school and put them back on track towards graduation. Promote your recruiting efforts in newsletters, announcements, websites, and on school marquees.

Look to the community at large for volunteers. Many businesses, civic organizations, and houses of worship have volunteer groups that are interested in worthwhile initiatives.

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.

A **Volunteer Registration Form** is an effective way to gather information on your volunteers and secure their commitment and desired assignment, schools, and times to volunteer.



Volunteers (cont.)

Training

Volunteer training is key to the program's success. In the Houston model, training is held approximately one to two weeks before the Walk. All volunteers are required to attend. Depending on the size of the school district and number of volunteers, it may be possible to hold training the morning of the Walk. Training lasts approximately 90 minutes.

The training objective is to produce volunteer teams that are confident and effective on their visits.

- Review the goals of the program and desired outcomes.
- Review the **home visit scripts**.
- Acquaint your volunteers with the **list of resources** in your community. This list should be developed by the Walk committee, with input from counselors and dropout specialists, and should address the root causes of dropouts such as lack of immunizations or school supplies, or transportation issues. It is helpful to also include information about assistance with employment, medical services, tutoring, special learning needs, and ESL.

On Walk day, volunteers will learn about the multiple challenges facing these students, and the ability to provide them with resource information may help students figure out how to return to school sooner.

- Provide guidance on how to handle certain situations. For example, one teen dropout told volunteers that she did not even know that she was allowed to continue school while she was pregnant.
- Provide instructions on what to do if no one is home.
- Remind volunteers to bring their cell phones on Walk day so they can easily call the school with questions.
- Review supplies that you will provide on Walk day and any forms you expect them to complete.
- Inform volunteers about dress for the day: comfortable clothes and walking shoes. Appropriate length shorts are acceptable.
- Advise the volunteers to bring water bottles, bug spray, sun screen, and other items that will make the Walk more comfortable.
- Leave ample time for questions and answers.



Walk Day

"As we were taking a young man back to school to re-enroll, we walked by a line of grandmothers sitting on their front porch and they gave us the thumb's up. That made us all feel good about what we were doing."

*—Mayor Bill White,
Houston, Texas*

Arrival Time

Start the day off on the right foot by being organized and ready to coordinate your volunteers. In Houston, volunteers are asked to commit from 8:00 a.m. until noon.

Check in Volunteers

Have a team and procedures in place for checking in volunteers and providing them with clear instructions about Walk logistics. It's a good idea to have a supply of **Volunteer Registration Forms** for those who have not previously signed up. Volunteers should sign in and receive nametags that identify them with your school. You may also want to provide **car signs** for their vehicles.

If you are able to provide a light breakfast—or enlist a donor to do so—that is always welcome. A light lunch is optional. It's also helpful to provide water bottles, sun screen, and mosquito spray.

Teams & Materials

Walk teams should be assigned in advance and formed strategically to include someone from the school district on each team. Teams work best with three to four volunteers who are given a list of eight to ten names and addresses of students who have not returned to school. The teams are given maps of their walk route and the general area, **lists of resources** to assist students and their family members, and **student information sheets** that should be completed after each home visit.

Provide volunteers with **door hangers** that they can leave for students who are not home; you want each student to know you tried to visit. Provide volunteers with **return to school cards** for students to use in re-enrollment. A supply of these items, along with pens and pencils, should be given to volunteers before they start the Walk.

Campus Activity During Walk

While the walkers are out, qualified staff should remain at the school to field volunteer questions and process students who come to school during the Walk to re-enroll. It is imperative that this re-enrollment process go smoothly.

Have a process in place to collect the completed **student information sheets** and to pass out and collect **evaluation forms** from volunteers.

Keep a list of students who re-enroll as a result of the Walk. Often, if these students are assigned a mentor, their efforts to stay in school are much more successful.



Community Collaborative Effort

Funding/In-Kind Donations

The Reach Out to Dropouts Walk is best implemented as a collaborative effort among government, school districts, corporations, and community members/groups. Most school districts depend heavily on donated funds, goods, services, and volunteer time. The cost of the “Reach Out to Dropouts” program can be considerably lower if community resources are used.

In Houston, some corporations sent volunteers and others provided in-kind donations, including phone bank services from Southwestern Bell, cell phones and service from Cingular, food for students and volunteers from Kroger and HEB 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 online newsletters that can be sent to their organization’s members and supporters.

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 small community newspapers have been particularly willing to promote the Walk.

The City’s Role

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 commitment of resources from 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.

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 an example for hundreds of volunteers by giving their time to personally volunteer with a team.

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. Houston learned that not only can we devise and implement successful dropout programs, but these programs can be even more successful than anyone imagined.



Countdown to Walk Day

Six Months Before	Commit to participate in the Walk. Superintendent: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• announces the Walk to the district• appoints a Project Coordinator• discuss the project with principals from participating schools
Five Months Before	Principals appoint Campus Project Leaders. Campus Project Leaders form a Planning Committee. Hold your first planning meeting with your campus committee.
Four Months Before	Post information about the Walk on your website.
Three Months Before	Begin preparing community resource list for students and families. Design Tee-shirts and materials.
Two Months Before	Arrange for printed materials, order Walk day supplies, and begin volunteer recruitment efforts.
One Month Before	Contact community security/police to inform about Walk day. Contact the media for event coverage
Two weeks Before	Complete volunteer training. Compile a “no show” student list for volunteers to use for making phone calls to verify addresses. Divide volunteers into teams. Get maps and other volunteer supplies ready.
Three Days Before	Volunteers place calls to students who did not return to school.
Two Days Before	Sort through student list and geographically arrange house visits for volunteer teams to visit. Finalize registration procedures and review checklist.
Walk Day	Reach Out to Dropouts Walk
One Week Later	Follow up meeting to evaluate results and suggest improvements for next year. Send a thank you note to volunteers.