

A photograph of a stone wall with a plaque. The plaque is made of a darker stone and is set into the wall. It has the words "PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS" carved into it in a serif font. The wall is made of large, rectangular stone blocks. The background is a soft-focus view of a grassy area.

PUBLIC
SCHOOL
SYSTEMS

STRONG

Students Futures Nation

by Lt. Gen. Benjamin C. Freakley, U.S. Army

As the events of an unfolding 21st century have demonstrated, we live in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world. It is the information age that brings knowledge to friend and foe alike. The traditional nation-states are waning. Major populations in China and India are driving up their economies and have become world competitors in education, business, and information.

Images of conflict spread rapidly across communication, social, and cyber networks by way of 24-hour global media. Increased access to information adds to the complexity of conflict as third-party actors are becoming a force—my experience in Afghanistan showed that the Taliban is armed with both rifles and computers. Worldwide media coverage highlights the social,

economic, and political consequences of local conflicts and increases potential for spillover, creating regional and global destabilizing effects. New ideas and old ideologies move as fast as an email.

Violent extremist groups such as Al Qaeda consider themselves at war with western democracies and even with certain Muslim states. Looking ahead, we see an era of persistent

conflict—protracted confrontations among state, non-state, and individual actors that are more often willing to use violence to achieve their political and ideological ends. Our traditional view of national power—diplomatic, economic, military, and information—has suffered setbacks, but it will continue to help us prepare to deal with competitors in this new age. Our adversaries will look for seams in our capability and will exploit them. Today our networks, values, and infrastructure are vulnerable and threatened. Our values as a society and our economic staying power are under siege from strong outside forces.

In the United States of America, we still believe ourselves to be the sole “super power” in the world, but even our economy has wavered. Yet we know that our economy drives our nation, and that education drives our economy.

Our nation must retain its ability to innovate—our strong suit has always been our ability to reinvent ourselves. Innovation and critical thinking are imperative, but these two capabilities are dependent upon education. Education is the underpinning to security and our hedge against uncertainty.

A NATIONAL SECURITY CRISIS

Because education drives our economy and our economy drives our nation, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated:

“[The] lack of quality education for all children jeopardizes the fundamental American belief that every citizen has the opportunity for success, no matter their background or place of origin...if we can't keep that true for every



Lt. Gen. Benjamin C. Freakley is the commanding general of the United States Army Accessions Command and responsible for world-wide recruiting of officers and enlisted soldiers for the U.S. Army.

American, we're going to lose who we are, and then we won't lead and so it is, for me, the most pressing national security issue.”

While the U.S. leads the way in many developments, it has witnessed a gradual decline in educational attainment and achievements among its secondary school student populations. The individual impact of this decline affects a person's ability to advance professionally and economically throughout his or her lifetime. Hilary Pennington, Director of Special Initiatives for The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, captured the impact succinctly: “Education is one of the most significant predictors of life outcomes for adults, and the single biggest predictor for their children.”

According to America's Promise Alliance, a non-partisan coalition of

more than 200 partner organizations across all sectors, an estimated 1.2 million students drop out of school every year and approximately 30 percent of all students fail to graduate. Of those who graduate, only half of those are prepared for college or work.

Across our society we are seeing cracks and fissures in our educational infrastructure. Nationwide, our high school graduation rate hovers around 70 percent, and is even lower in urban areas, where only slightly more than half of our African-American and Hispanic youth graduate from high school.

Indications are that dropout clusters are concentrated ethnically, socio-economically, and geographically. Brenda Welburn writes: “By 2020, roughly 30 percent of the working-age population in the United States will be Latino and African American. Yet these economically indispensable population groups, along with low-income youngsters, consistently lag farthest behind academically.” Researchers from Johns Hopkins point to the roughly 15 percent of U.S. high schools that produce nearly half of our nation's dropouts; the researchers brand these 2,000 dysfunctional high schools as “dropout factories.”

In addition, many of our schools have significant problems with student disengagement, students who lose interest and simply give up trying to learn and achieve, even though technically they may remain enrolled. Focus groups with dropouts have indicated that the students were more likely to drop out because they were unmotivated, not challenged enough, or overwhelmed by troubles outside of school, rather than because they were failing academically.

WHY EDUCATION AND THE ARMY?

Scholars, educators, and business leaders recognize that the U.S. Army has made and will continue to make significant contributions to the long-term security and prosperity of our nation through its many educational programs and partnerships. Hugh Price, visiting professor in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, stated:

“The U.S. military is one promising place to look for insights and ideas [on education]. After all, it enjoys a well-deserved reputation for reaching, teaching, and training young people who are rudderless, and for setting the pace among American institutions in advancing minorities. What’s more, for many years various branches of the military have either run or collaborated with public schools in operating alternative schools, schools within schools, extracurricular programs, and youth corps for dropouts.”

The Army and the nation’s educators share much in common:

- a commitment to the development of young people in ways that stay with them throughout their lives,
- a respect for inculcating the values that support informed citizenship, and
- a recognition that every single year, there’s an essential “baton pass” from our schools to our Army—for many of the soldiers who enter our Army come directly from our schools.

While recruiting a highly qualified volunteer force is not without its chal-

lenges, America has an extraordinary Army, and we in positions of leadership are grateful to education leaders and educators everywhere who teach and develop our young people before they join the military.

Each year, our Army—to meet end strength levels set by Congress—needs to recruit 130,000 new soldiers and put 5,400 young people on a path to officership via Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs on the nation’s colleges and universities, each student a volunteer. Recruiters in your communities and professors of military science on 273 campuses across our great country do *not* want to pull every young American into the U.S. Army. That’s a misperception I would appreciate state board members’ help in dispelling.

But there are youths who are or may be interested in military service, who want to serve our country or build their futures via the training, skills, leadership development, and higher education benefits provided by this form of national service. We want those young people to be able to realize their aspiration to successfully become soldiers, Marines, sailors, or airmen.

Our young people first need to know and understand the opportunities provided by military service in today’s Army and, second, they need to realize that the choice to join is not an option of last resort. Rather, they need to know and understand that their decision to join the military is a *respected* choice among administrators, counselors, teachers, coaches, parents, and their community. I urge ongoing, good-faith interaction between recruiters and educators to ensure access to accurate information about military options for all students

and support for those young people who choose a military option.

But wanting to join may not be sufficient. Our enlistment criteria are stringent. Those who wish to qualify for military service must hold a high school diploma or its equivalent and score at least 50 on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery. They must be fit enough to take on the physical challenge of becoming a soldier. They must be persons of good character. And they must be as ready as possible to learn the skills required of a 21st century workforce—for the military is, after all, the largest employer of youths aged 17-24 in the nation.

The shocking fact is that of today’s approximately 32 million 17- to 24-year-olds in America, fewer than 3 in 10 are fully eligible to enlist. Almost 40 percent have medical or conduct issues that disqualify them for service, and almost 7 million never completed high school or scored too low on the qualifying test. More than 3.6 million are too overweight to qualify for service.

But the 3 in 10 who are qualified to enlist will make it. The military will welcome them and will invest tens of thousands of dollars in training each one of them, higher education will reach for them, and business will compete for and hire them.

WHAT ABOUT THE 7 IN 10?

It’s on the others—the 7 in 10—where we must focus our efforts. Together, we have a shared responsibility for changing that statistic, for improving it, for transforming the dynamic.

We—as a nation—need far more of our young people to successfully

graduate, to be ready and motivated for the kind of training and education required in a complex and uncertain world, to be interested and competent in science and math, to be healthier and more fit than many of our youth today, to be guided by a compass of high integrity, and to have rich perspectives about the world.

We need to take the collective lead in fostering a generation of agile, ethical learners adept in 21st century skills in order to be a nation capable of protecting itself in the 21st century security environment. Superior education drives global competitiveness. Global competitiveness yields economic security. Economic security is what creates quality of life and a keener ability for the U.S. to influence the global stage, and that influence is integral to national security.

Never has this been more true. Ours is a world shaped by powerful and potent forces: globalization, technology, ambiguity, complexity, all with a tempo of change and innovation that was unimaginable several decades ago. It is a world in which extreme and dangerous ideologies can quickly gain currency and momentum where hope and economic wherewithal are lacking.

Indeed, the vitality, strength, security and vibrant future of the United States rests on whether we—as soldiers and educators, leaders all—succeed in making young people more capable, more able to succeed, and closer to realizing their potential as individuals and citizens.

THE NASBE-ARMY PARTNERSHIP

Decisive action is required if the United States is to maintain its

position as a leader, remain globally competitive, and safeguard national security. Educators, business and community leaders, military leaders and other major stakeholders must act quickly and with conviction to address the current crisis in education.

With \$161 million in tuition assistance supplied to active duty and Reserve soldiers in 2008 alone, the U.S. Army is a primary investor in post-secondary education. With its long history of training young men and women, educating and developing leaders, and collaborating with community organizations to improve student outcomes, the U.S. Army is deeply committed to improving educational opportunities and the post-secondary accomplishments of our young people.

We have a strategic interest in increasing student academic achievement as the Army will continue to seek knowledgeable workers to help fill leadership positions and carry out our important mission for decades to come. As with other leading industries and global enterprises, the U.S. Army shares a common interest in improving education for all. We realize that the future of strategic military defense requires a range of knowledge-based skills, technological aptitude and high-level competencies among soldiers and officers.

While known primarily as a provider of our nation's top security forces and defender of our national interests around the world, the U.S. Army is also one of the leading federal organizations that supports and invests in educational initiatives around the country. These investments are predicated on the deep-seated conviction that our national security is strengthened by an informed, well-educated,

and competent citizenry. We also see it as part of our shared responsibility to enable the brightest and best futures for our young people.

It is because of this imperative that we regard our partnership with NASBE as one of our most significant endeavors. We (the Army) have entered discussions with NASBE and the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) focusing on:

- comprehensive post-secondary planning;
- drop-out prevention, intervention and recovery;
- applying what the Army has learned from its high school JROTC programs as broader tenets that can be implemented in a civilian context to prevent obesity and dropouts;
- improving student readiness for whatever the next life-stage step they choose after high school;
- and a very early exploration around Army college scholarships that could be applied to address future teacher shortages.

PROJECT PASS (Partnership for All Students' Success)

One result of our joint discussions has been to host a conference to announce a pilot program that we hope will produce measureable and positive outcomes in six “dropout factory” school districts, which will include the feeder middle schools. The intent behind Project PASS is to mass our assets (including free educational programs offered by the Army), community backing, volunteer support, and DOE School Improvement Funds to provide intensive teaching and mentoring to at-risk students.

What is Project PASS?

Project PASS is an innovative dropout prevention and intervention strategy targeted specifically at communities where dropout rates are exceptionally and unacceptably high. Using a competitive grant process, NASBE will identify communities ready to use state, local and federal resources to align and to sustain services and support between JROTC high schools and feeder middle schools in districts with intolerable dropout rates.

As an additional support, students participating in Project PASS will benefit from supplementary academic support and community services starting in middle school. Project coordination and oversight is being supported by the U.S. Army.

For more information,
contact NASBE Senior Project Associate
Darin Simmons at darins@nasbe.org.



As reported in “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts,” we intend to address a significant number of student concerns, as well as academic rigor. A sense of belonging should be inculcated to address self-esteem and confidence, while an emphasis on teamwork will bind the students together. Motivation and self-discipline will be key. Valuing each student and challenging them to succeed will strengthen their belief in self. Structure and routine, as well as mentoring and monitoring, will help negate negative behaviors outside the school and instill the skills and self-discipline needed to function in the workforce and life. Rewards and recognition will demonstrate that contributions are valued, while accountability and consequences will provide an atmosphere of learning in safety.

Our partnership with NASBE is based on sharing our respective expertise and skill sets. I must acknowledge the work of Brenda Welburn and her staff, who have thrown themselves body and soul into making Project PASS a reality. In this world, there are thinkers and doers. Thinkers are

thought leaders; they are important because they push us to question and to discern, and to break new ground. Doers are those action-oriented pragmatists who make things happen—whose hard work and innovations can change the arc of another individual’s life—or even of society as a whole.

Brenda is one of those important contributors who is both a thought leader and a doer. We are all made more fortunate by her work and by your work as policymakers and advisors at the state level—where the real business of educating our young people happens.

WHAT MATTERS

Our work together matters, because our nation’s young people matter. Consider the circle of life in which we shape the child/student into the young adult/employee/citizen/contributor. We must contribute today to their tomorrow. We must separate the status quo from what matters.

What matters is that the young people we all shepherd believe they have a future, believe that they can get somewhere and become something more.

What matters is that they can begin to realize their dreams and satisfy their ambitions.

What matters is that they become tomorrow’s work force that keeps America strong in economics, business, education, and defense.

What matters is that they can put themselves in a position to take care of their families and to contribute to their communities.

What matters is that they are prepared to take from us the navigation of a complex and uncertain world.

The U.S. Army has deep experience, broad geographic reach, and demonstrated success among at-risk populations. It understands that our greatest strength comes from ensuring that all young people in the nation are empowered and prepared to be productive and healthy contributors to society. The Army shares in the commitment and common cause that developing our nation’s youth to be successful in work and in life will lead to a stronger nation. I look forward to continuing our work together, and to a robust partnership that fosters strong students, strong futures, and a strong nation. ■