The high school dropout problem has been called “a national obsession” (Finn, 1989, p.117), one that education policy makers and school practitioners have spent decades trying to solve. As far back as 1963, for instance, the Kennedy administration created a summer program meant to help local schools identify dropouts and return them to school in the fall (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1964). In 1994, when Congress enacted Goals 2000, it made fixing the dropout problem a top priority (goal #2 was to raise the high school completion rate to at least 90%), and it has remained so under No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the Every Student Succeeds Act.

Judging by recent trends, some combination of these and myriad other local, state, and federal efforts to address the dropout problem have had positive effects. Indeed, the adjusted cohort on-time graduation rate reached an all-time high of 84% in 2015-16, the most recent school year for which we have data (McFarland, Hussar, et al., 2018). In short, the evidence suggests that as a country, we can make (and have made) significant progress in reducing the percentage of young people who leave our public schools without a diploma.

But still, it’s much too early to declare victory over the dropout problem. For one thing, progress has been irregular across states, districts, and schools. As yet, only two states (New Jersey and Iowa) have met or exceeded the 90% completion goal endorsed by four successive presidential administrations and adopted by the Grad Nation Campaign (DePaoli et al., 2018), and a number of states lag far behind. In 2015-16, for example, the on-time high school graduation rate in New Mexico was just 71% (McFarland, Hussar, et al., 2018). Similarly, while some schools graduate nearly every student, many others (13% of high schools across the country) graduate 67% or less of their students (DePaoli et al., 2018).

Further, while some student populations have seen their completion rates rise...
steadily in recent years, others have not. Nationally, the on-time graduation rate is 91% for Asian/Pacific Island students and 88% for White students, while the rates for Hispanic (79%), Black (76%), and American Indian/Alaska Native (72%) students remain considerably lower (McFarland et al., 2018a). So too do completion rates lag behind for students with limited English proficiency, recent immigrants to the United States, and students with disabilities. And the consequences of dropping out of school are becoming increasingly dire. Students who drop out of school not only have diminished income and employment opportunities, but they and their families are more likely to live in poverty (Fontenot, Semega, & Kollar, 2018), require government assistance (Irving & Loveless, 2015), have poorer health (Lucas & Benson, 2018), and be incarcerated (Sum et al., 2009).

Indeed, the successful completion of high school is more important today than at any other time in our nation’s history — and note the term successful completion, here. Focusing only on dropout rates misses part of the story, as many students return to school or enter a GED program and graduate later on. Further, not everybody who completes high school can be described as “successful.” Many young people hold a diploma but lack the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college, vocational training, or the workforce. And the true purposes of school completion have been undermined by numerous efforts to game the system by lowering standards and manipulating data to show improved graduation rates.

### Why students leave: Key research findings

The idea of successful completion is critical to keep in mind: Our goal isn’t just to ensure that students remain enrolled in school for a requisite number of minutes, days, and years but to prepare them to be productive members of society. As such, many of us who study and work on these issues have shifted in recent years from a focus on preventing negative outcomes (leaving school) to creating positive ones (graduating and moving on successfully) by finding ways to boost student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement.

Dozens of demographic variables are associated with early school leaving. Statistically speaking, young people are more or less likely to earn a diploma depending on their socioeconomic status (SES), race, parents’ marital status, the region of the country they’re from, and on and on. However, because these “status variables” (as they’re often called) are difficult or impossible to change, they don’t lend themselves to the development of dropout prevention strategies. For instance, schools can’t do anything about the fact that some students come from low-income families.

To determine the overall risk that students in a given school or district will drop out — as well as to monitor progress and decide where to target resources — it’s useful to look carefully at data related to race, SES, parents’ marital status, and other demographic variables. But if educators pay too much attention to demographic factors alone, then they can easily overlook many students who need support (for example, affluent students who have disengaged from school) and squander resources trying to promote school completion among students who don’t need that help (such as the 76% of Black students who graduate on time).

Schools can, however, address many other variables known to influence student outcomes, such as attendance, homework completion, and participation in class and extracurricular activities, as well as students’ feelings of belonging, their educational aspirations, perceptions about the relevance of their schoolwork, and other indicators of engagement in school and learning. Thus, many of these variables are featured prominently in early warning systems, designed to monitor student performance and signal the need for timely intervention.

In short, if the goal is to determine which students would benefit from supports and interventions meant to promote school completion, then it’s most useful to focus on “functional” risk variables — for example, students’ absences, behavior