

The New York Times

A New Dropout Crisis

David Leonhardt

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First, President Trump's cancellation of a planned summit with North Korea follows foreign-policy snafus this week with China and Iran, notes *The New Yorker's* Susan Glasser. The common thread? Trump's failure to understand that negotiations almost always produce imperfect deals, as Lindsey Ford, a former Defense Department official, explains in *The Times*. His lack of sophistication is letting Asian countries take advantage of the United States.

Also, Nick Kristof and the editorial board weigh in on North Korea, and an interactive simulation looks at how war can happen — and how it can be avoided.

The new dropout crisis. The decline in the high-school dropout rate has been one of the big educational successes of the last few decades. About 16 percent of high-school students fail to graduate on time, down significantly from previous decades, with the biggest drops among Latinos and African-Americans. It's a sign that progress really is possible in education.

If anything, in fact, the biggest dropout crisis is no longer in high schools. It's in colleges.

Chad Aldeman of Bellwether Education Partners — a group that advocates for narrowing educational gaps — tweeted a telling chart recently. It showed the total number of college and K-12 dropouts in the United States, going back to the early 1990s.

It's a good news/bad news story. About a decade ago, the number of college dropouts exceeded the number of K-12 dropouts, and the two have continued to move in opposite directions since then. And if you focus only on high-school dropouts — excluding people, many of whom are immigrants, who dropped out earlier and never reached high school — there are now about twice as many college dropouts as high-school dropouts.

There are multiple causes of the college-dropout boom. K-12 schools certainly deserve a substantial amount of blame, because they produce too many ill-prepared students. But colleges — and policymakers — deserve a lot of blame, as well. For years, higher education paid far too little attention to results. That's starting to change, as Tina Rosenberg has described in several *Times* Op-Eds, but there is still an enormous amount of work to do.

The worst part of the college-dropout problem is the cost to students. The returns on a college degree are very large, in terms of money, health and happiness. And a growing share of college dropouts come from low- and middle-income families, which means that colleges' low graduation rates are stifling upward mobility. I went into more detail in a recent column.

The United States was able to make progress on the high-school dropout crisis partly because of how much attention it received from educators and policymakers over the last few decades. I hope we're on the verge of giving a similar amount of attention to our college-dropout crisis.

Department of disagreement. At National Review, Ramesh Ponnuru takes issue with my newsletter on the recent Supreme Court decision on arbitration and suggests people read Walter Olson of the Cato Institute praising the decision. The Times editorial board, by contrast, takes issue with the decision.

Speaking of National Review ... A clarification: In yesterday's newsletter, I quoted an Elizabeth Evans tweet pointing people to a National Review article criticizing the N.F.L. She asked me to clarify that her tweet simply repeated the article's subhead and did not contain her original words. (As it happens, David French — the author of that N.F.L. article — has a new Op-Ed on the same subject.)