

Jobs For America's Graduates: The Nation's Premier Educational Recovery Program



Michael T. Nietzel Contributor 

Education

I am a former university president who writes about higher education.

After several consecutive years of slow improvement, the nation's [high school graduation rate stands at 84%](#). Although this increase is encouraging, a hard reality remains - one of every six students beginning high school does not finish it, leaving the U.S. graduation rate [near the bottom of economically developed nations](#).

If only there were a program that could help struggling students earn their high school diploma, an educational recovery intervention that helps students graduate and progress to productive careers or advanced education.

Guess what? There is. It's called [Jobs for America's Graduates \(JAG\)](#), and across a 40-year history, it's proven to be the country's most effective drop-out prevention program. JAG has served more than 1.2 million students and currently operates in 35 states, annually helping more than 70,000

students work toward graduation followed by meaningful work or postsecondary education.

How It Works

The JAG model can be applied in middle-school, out-of-school, or alternative schools, but the most common format is with high-school students who've been identified by school officials to be facing substantial barriers to graduation, usually some combination of poverty, family instability, and personal trauma. Each program is run by a *specialist*, typically a full-time teacher at the school. The standard program includes these elements:

- A cohort of 35-45 participants takes a for-credit class that trains them in six employability competencies – career development, job attainment, job survival, basic skills, leadership, and self-development and personal skills.
- A JAG Club, called the Career Association, forms

students into teams that complete tasks often encountered in the workplace.

- The specialist provides counseling, mentoring, and personal support to participants. For many JAG students, this is the first positive relationship they've had with an adult.
- Students are challenged with experiences like a national conference in Washington, D.C. or a statewide career development conference.
- Specialists follow students for at least 12 months after graduation, helping with employment and job searches and/or navigating postsecondary educational opportunities.
- For students who might not have yet graduated, the specialist continues to help them complete remaining requirements.
- The specialist tracks participants' educational and career progress on a monthly basis during the follow-up year.

What It Achieves

The national JAG class of 2017 had eye-popping results, including a:

- High school graduation rate of 95%.
- Full-time placement rate of 91% of graduates working at a job, serving in the military, pursuing post-secondary education or a combination of these activities at a full-time level.

Why It Succeeds

Core principles have guided JAG since its outset in 1979 and have contributed to its remarkable record. These tenets include:

Bipartisan leadership.

From its beginning, JAG has earned bipartisan support from elected officials. Its founding board of directors included then-Vice President George H.W. Bush and former Vice President Walter Mondale. Its current board chair is Eric Holcomb, Republican Governor of Indiana, and its Vice Chair is John Bel Edwards, Democrat Governor of Louisiana.

Investment by employers and foundations.

Much of JAG's operating budget is underwritten by private donations, led by major gifts from organizations such as AT&T, GE, Archer Daniels Midland, Delta

Regional Authority, CIT, Bank of America, Microsoft, Tyson Foods, Entergy and the American Staffing Association.

Thorough training of JAG specialists.

The specialists are intensively trained in the JAG model, particularly the core competencies. According to Paul Kincaid, Executive Director of JAG-Missouri, "most specialists see their role as more than a job or more than a teaching position. They describe it as a "calling," with most saying they want to spend the rest of their career working with JAG students."

A dual emphasis on workforce competencies and educational attainment.

"Jobs" is the organization's first name for a reason. It has always emphasized preparing youth to succeed in high-quality work and uses that goal to motivate students academically.

A flexible network of state and local structures.

JAG engages governors, departments of education, school superintendents, workforce agencies, college leaders and local employers to build and maintain the program. Its state-level organization is flexible, sometimes taking the form of a private 501(c)(3), sometimes

operating under a department in state government (Full disclosure: I serve on JAG-Missouri's Board of Directors).

Stability of leadership.

JAG has had one president/CEO across its four decades: Kenneth M. Smith, who's been unwavering in maintaining bipartisan political support and financial backing from the business community.

The resiliency of the students themselves.

JAG lights a fire under talented students. Determined to live the lives they now can imagine, JAG graduates make bright futures come true.