Leniece Flowers says she “felt alone” on the road to college. She stands outside her alma mater, Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx. Once a “drop-out factory,” Columbus is now slated for closure by the New York City Department of Education.

On an autumn morning in 1998, some 3,000 teenagers streamed into the stone- and-red-brick building of Christopher Columbus High School in the Bronx, ready for their first day of class. Four years later, only three out of five of them would leave with diplomas. The remaining two simply vanished on the road from freshman to senior year. Leniece Flowers (N.Y. ’05), a ninth-grader at Christopher Columbus in 1998, was determined not to meet that fate. “It was a culture that was just really demoralizing,” says Flowers, who remembers many classmates being encouraged to study mechanics or sign up for the military. A standout student, she tracked into Advanced Placement courses and developed close relationships with teachers who encouraged her college plans.

That didn’t make the application process any less daunting. Flowers’ parents—her mother is a corrections officer, and her father is a sanitation worker—never went to college and were at a loss to help their daughter. “I felt alone in that process,” she recalls.

Knowing that her parents couldn’t afford college tuition, Flowers hunted down scholarships and filled out the convoluted Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) on her own, redoing it three times to correct mistakes. Flowers eventually got into three colleges and decided on the University of Vermont, which had flown her up for a visit. But as a freshman, she felt as alone as ever. She was one of only a small number of African American students on campus and, despite joining several clubs, had made few friends.

To make matters worse, for the first time in her life, Flowers struggled academically. When her first paper came back with a low grade and riddled with red pen marks, she realized she lacked the writing skills her classmates already possessed. “Constructing the actual paper—developing one central idea and focusing on that, and then tying everything together—I really struggled because I hadn’t had much experience...
Canada, Korea, Russia, and seven other OECD states. The cost to students, as well as the economy, is high. Those without college degrees have almost double the unemployment rate of those with them. In 2008, numbers from the Labor Department showed that workers with bachelor’s degrees made 54 percent more, on average, than those who dropped out of college. Economists project that by the end of the decade, nearly 8 in 10 new jobs will require workforce training or higher education.

In response, the Obama administration has placed “college readiness” at the heart of its education reform efforts. The Department of Education’s Race to the Top requires universities to show how they increase both college enrollment and the number of students who complete at least a year of college. President Obama has set a goal of boosting the number of college graduates by 8 million over the next 10 years.

But setting an ambitious goal is no guarantee of success. The bottom line is that far too many students who make it to college wind up leaving without a degree. For low-income and minority students—many of whom are the first in their families to attend college—a whole host of pressures can conspire to derail even the most committed among them.

J.B. Schramm is the founder of College Summit, a national organization that partners with schools and districts to promote college readiness. Founded in 1993, the program has served 35,000 students, the majority of whom are low-income and minority. About 80 percent of College Summit’s participants enroll in college, thanks to a model that includes college-preparatory course work and the training of “peer leaders,” students who help to build a college-going culture in the school.

Schramm says the roadmap for increasing college graduation rates is clear: “The key issues are academic preparation, college matching and transition support, and financial aid.” He says: “Students also need skills for handling obstacles and persevering through the inevitable challenges they are going to face. How do you do that?” she explains. “I had written papers, but none of them were research-based. They were short. Coming up with a topic was a whole new world. Citing sources, that was new.”

slicker get harder. So, while 35 percent of the young people, trailing behind place to 12th in college graduation thousands of dollars of debt. American students do so. Most of them drop out without degrees, saddled with thousands of dollars of debt.

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Raising rigor
In the California State University system, which requires admitted students to have at least a B average in high school, more than 60 percent of entering freshmen in 2010—that’s 25,000 students—needed remediation in math, English, or both. Many of the public schools teach what I refer to as “almost algebra,” says CSU chancellor Charles Reed. “The rigor is just not there.”

Sadly, California is not an anomaly. Across the country, it has become painfully clear that what it takes to earn a high school diploma is fundamentally misaligned with what is required to succeed in college. A 2009 national survey of 7,660 middle- and high-school teachers and college instructors by the ACT found that just 26 percent of those who entered high school as freshmen were graduating college-ready. Yet just 26 percent of college freshmen reported having attended remedial classes to students who have recently graduated from high school.

“You can’t make up for a year’s worth of remediation throughout the curriculum, building support into regular course work through tutoring. And even then, ‘You can’t make up for a year’s worth of preparation in one term,’” he says. The real answer lies in boosting rigor throughout the K-12 continuum, with primary and middle grades laying the foundation for a challenging college-preparatory experience in high school.

“Sweeping generalizations about low-income students dropping out of college don’t improve K-12 instruction,” Schramm says. “We need to actually find out which students are dropping out and in what courses they are struggling. We can then get that kind of data in the hands of educators about their own students, then we’re going to start to see more accurate goals and real improvements in how instruction is delivered.”

But it will take more than merely raising the target to shift the culture of whole schools or systems. Students and teachers must change their mind-sets, too. Edward Wang (N.Y. ‘94) has taught some of his students at Thurgood Marshall Academy in Harlem.

It was in danger of becoming a statistic. “I didn’t believe in myself,” she says. By 1994, she had found a scholarship. Socially isolated and overwhelmed. “I would just blindly pick classes and suffer through them,” she explains. “I had written papers, but none of them were research-based. They were short. Coming up with a topic was a whole new world. Citing sources, that was new.”

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We are fighting a battle to extend the vision beyond 12th grade,” says 14-year-old Terrence Fowler (N.Y. ’10) (with some of his students at Thurgood Marshall Academy in Harlem).
school, Thurgood Marshall Academy, for 16 years. The 6-12 school has a good track record of getting its students into college, but many of those who had graduated ended struggling with the advanced coursework. Wang paid attention to her students and telling teachers that they felt poorly prepared for college. So Thurgood adopted a model similar to Balanced Academic Year’s Middle Curriculum for its sixth-through-tenth graders. Wang says the intent was to lay a strong foundation so that high school wouldn’t be a time to catch up but rather a true precursor in college-level work. The transition has been slow. “We are fighting a battle to extend the vision beyond 12th grade,” says Wang, who teaches physics and design technology and coordinates the IB program. “It’s a less tangible goal for kids who aren’t thinking about attending college. It’s a precursor to college-level work.”

“Parents love it. Now they know what their kids are doing and how to help their kids. It’s shown me that you can’t let fear of something new stop you from doing what you know is right for your students.”

A good match
When it was time for Lenice Flowers to apply to college, she turned to a guidance counselor at her high school for advice. She had always dreamed of going to Columbia University. With straight A’s and an impressive resume of extracurricular activities and summer internships, she thought she was a shoo-in. But the counselor informed her that even a much less selective public university in upstate New York would be a stretch. Flowers didn’t apply to Columbia. “No one teaches you to reach,” she says looking back. And disappointment isn’t the only fallout. It turns out that reaching for the very best school you can matters enormously when it comes to a student’s likelihood of graduating. A 2009 study by researchers William Bowen and Michael McPherson found that students who “undermatch”—meaning they choose not to attend the best-fit school for them—are less likely to earn a degree. High-achieving students who went to more selective schools graduated at a rate of 81 percent, compared with 66 percent of those at less selective schools. In other words, matching well significantly increases one’s chance of graduating.

This is because, generally speaking, at more selective colleges there is an institutional culture of achievement—gradersexist. “Parents love it. Now they know what their kids are doing and how to help their kids. It’s shown me that you can’t let fear of something new stop you from doing what you know is right for your students.”

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Diversity is not an issue of racial admittance to a campus, but a matter of what universities do for the students who attend. The institutions that are doing the best job are those that are not just placing services in place but aggressively ensuring students are using them. One such model comes out of Florida State University, which over the last decade has reversed its black-white graduation gap—today, 74 percent of black students at FSU graduate, compared with 67 percent of Caucasian students. The school’s Center for Academic Retention and Enrichment (CARE) is geared toward first-generation and low-income freshmen. Students connect with a mentor and attend various workshops that include academic classes as well as seminars on studying techniques and managing financial aid. They are encouraged to find tutors but are not forced to do so. “It includes academic classes as well as seminars on studying techniques and managing financial aid,” says Jose Cruz of Florida State University, which over the last decade has reversed its black-white graduation gap—today, 74 percent of black students at FSU graduate, compared with 67 percent of Caucasian students. The school’s Center for Academic Retention and Enrichment (CARE) is geared toward first-generation and low-income freshmen. Students connect with a mentor and attend various workshops that include academic classes as well as seminars on studying techniques and managing financial aid. They are encouraged to find tutors but are not forced to do so. “It includes academic classes as well as seminars on studying techniques and managing financial aid,” says Jose Cruz of Florida State University. “Students don’t feel like they’re alone in the classroom. The institutions that are doing the best job are those that are not just placing services in place but aggressively ensuring students are using them.”

In the last decade or so, enrollment in AP classes has been growing at a dizzying rate—with the number of AP tests administered more than doubling in recent years. Meanwhile, the percentage of students taking the AP exams has also shot up. In 2008, about 533,000 students took AP exams; in 2010, the figure was 779,000. Meanwhile, high schoolers are being encouraged to do more AP work by guidance counselors and sometimes by college recruiters. The College Board, which administers the SAT, reports that the average number of AP tests taken by students has increased by 51 percent from 2000 to 2008. With so many students taking so many tests, it’s not surprising that some are raising concerns about the validity and reliability of AP scores. In fact, some experts say that the number of students taking AP exams has increased so dramatically that some of these tests might no longer be good indicators of college readiness. In fact, some experts say that the number of students taking AP exams has increased so dramatically that some of these tests might no longer be good indicators of college readiness.

Great expectations
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little obstacles that many students figure out how to deal with in college become really insurmountable for some of our students," Torkelson says.

In addition to its continued focus on ramping up academics such as writing skills, IDEA implements a Road to College curriculum beginning in the sixth grade. Full-time college counselors lead classes on how to overcome "barriers faced by students from socioeconomically disadvantaged homes." That includes helping kids apply to college and coaching them on how to access tutoring and build relationships with the decision makers in the financial aid office. By the time students apply to college, Torkelson says, they have visited around 30 universities as part of the school's "field lessons" program.

IDEA also started an employee-giving campaign called Gimme Five that has raised several hundred thousand dollars to use as emergency loans for its alumni in college. A committee of teachers oversees the program and responds swiftly to requests that come in from students "to make up some small, unforeseen gap that has emerged."

Schools aren't the only ones providing this type of highly personalized support. Programs like Urban Students Empowered in Chicago aim to support low-income students of color through the critical transition to college. U.S. Empowered resembles other college-preparatory programs, including College Summit and AVTD, a 30-year-old program used in more than 4,000 schools around the country, but its support extends through freshman year of college.

U.S. Empowered works with 15 Chicago high schools, serving 545 students. Ninety-nine percent of the program's participants have been admitted to four-year colleges, and 83 percent of the enrollees are part of completing this. It has to pervade and be woven into the entire DNA of a school. We're constantly trying to get kids to understand—that's what success looks like, being able to problem-solve, being able to ask for help.”

Putting a value on education
Kewauna Lerma worries about how she'll pay for college. Her mother survives on disability payments, and, over the past year, Lerma has applied for as many scholarships as she can find. "I don't want to have to drop out if I can't pay," she says. Considering the odds Lerma has beaten to get this KIPP is among the K-12 schools that have started teaching these critical character skills to students. Cofounder Dave Levin (Houston '92) says Penn researcher Martin Seligman has identified seven traits connected to student success. In two separate studies last year, University of Pennsylvania researcher Angela Duckworth found that self-discipline is a stronger predictor of grades than IQ, and that individuals with "grit"—those who persevere through adversity to achieve long-term goals—are more likely to have graduated from college.

More and more, traits like resilience, persistence, and tenacity are being talked about as essentials for college success. In two separate studies last year, University of Pennsylvania researcher Martin Seligman has identified seven traits connected with happiness and success. "Three of those are as important as IQ in terms of life outcomes, and those are zest, grit, and self-control," he says.

So how do you cultivate these qualities in students? Levin says it's important to name the skills explicitly, to model them, to call out when students demonstrate them, and praise demonstration of character over ability. "Everything you do should have a character component," Levin explains. "If you're doing a long writing assignment, you explain how grit and self-control are part of completing this. It has to pervade and be woven into the entire DNA of a school. We're constantly trying to get kids to understand—that's what success looks like, being able to problem-solve, being able to ask for help.”

Putting a value on education
Kewauna Lerma worries about
The Obama administration estimates that 2 million students who are qualified to go to college won’t go because they can’t afford it.

Decisions about student aid need to reflect more than just the bottom line, says Cruz. “It all boils down to: What do you value?”

After a rocky start, Leniece Flowers began to regain her footing. She met with professors who would eventually become mentors and took their advice on how to balance her course load. She also applied to become a residential advisor in her dorm, to get more integrated with campus life. “All those things I learned late in the game,” she says.

By the end of her senior year, Flowers had spent four semesters on the Dean’s List and graduated with a 3.3 GPA. After completing her corps commitment in New York City, she went on to Columbia University and earned her master’s degree in education and sociology.

Flowers, who now recruits teachers for Houston public schools, says her will to succeed and the encouragement of her mentors kept her on track. “That’s what it takes to get through college—you have to face adversity and be able to see the bigger picture,” she says. “And you can’t do it alone.”

Melissa was once a fifth grader at KIPP. She’s now a 2010 corps member.

What if all children knew they had unlimited potential?