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## A lifeline to high school dropouts

**Nearly a third of students failed to graduate. Universities must step in.**

**By John B. Simpson**

**BUFFALO, N.Y.** - Spring is a time of pride and joy for families of the 3 million students who will graduate from American high schools this year. As a nation, however, this number should embarrass us. That is because nearly a third of students who began as freshmen four years ago dropped out of high school and will not receive a traditional diploma.

The situation in our urban school districts is bleaker still. According to a Manhattan Institute analysis of government data from 2003, at least 40 percent of students failed to graduate from the nation's 10 largest public districts. Results are even more distressing for minority students, especially boys. Less than half of black and Hispanic males will earn a high school diploma at the current graduation rate.

Though some will later earn a GED and achieve personal and professional success, most dropouts will be relegated to life at the economic margins of society.

Our country sounds the alarm on dropout rates with some regularity. A recent Time magazine cover piece, "Dropout Nation," has pundits pointing fingers at the usual suspects: lax education laws, poorly trained teachers, and indifferent parents.

But societal conditions, like dysfunctional classrooms, student boredom, discrimination, and communities torn by drugs and violence, also are to blame. Indeed, for many dropouts, these conditions were a part of their lives long before high school.

Therefore, dropouts are not only saying good riddance to a lousy school experience; they are reflecting a complex set of social and educational ills in need of systemic solutions.

Because of this complexity, blaming a single cause is not a wise approach. To reverse this calamity, we first need two major changes of perspective.

To begin, we must acknowledge that more than just being a weakness in public secondary education, today's dropout rate signifies a societal crisis of the first order - one that is leading to the steady erosion of American democracy.

The right to a quality education is the backbone of our economic health and a cornerstone of our social compact. But our republic simply cannot thrive when nearly a third of its future citizens do not receive the most basic level of education to allow for full participation in society.

Second, we must engage a broader set of institutions to collaborate on solutions to the underlying causes of the crisis. A major step in this direction would be to ask what role our

nation's institutions of higher education - and especially public universities - might play.

Never has there been a clearer need or greater opportunity for American universities to fully engage a social issue of such consequence. Public universities possess the intellectual, financial, and human resources necessary to play an educational leadership role. And service to the community already is a fundamental aspect of their missions. Improving local school achievement is in their own interest.

Some institutions already partner with or "adopt" specific schools to improve student achievement on a small scale. But a broader, deeper, and more creative approach is needed.

Public higher education can't solve all our educational problems, nor should it. These institutions can, however, look holistically at the community's entire "Pre-K-16 continuum" and act as a catalyst for improvement in areas where it is most needed.

Our state universities, by dint of their legions of experts, are uniquely positioned to address the complexity of the crisis. Therefore, a partnership between a university and local schools could move beyond simply engaging education professionals to include early childhood experts sharing the latest insights on cognitive development, addiction researchers working to break generational cycles of dependence, and laboratory scientists demonstrating novel techniques and exciting discoveries.

This might all seem like common sense, but it actually represents a radical departure from current practice. For example, many of the measures now proposed to cut the dropout rate, like better counseling and a higher minimum dropout age, might bring incremental improvement but still treat the problem as if its roots were in the high schools themselves.

The University at Buffalo has several initiatives planned or under way to help Western New York students gain the skills needed to thrive in high school and beyond. This is a good start, but we have a lot of work left to do.

Fostering resilient communities is, perhaps, the most meaningful service our public universities can provide. And taking on a leadership role in education would be the highest manifestation of that service.

- *John B. Simpson is president of the University at Buffalo, The State University of New York.*

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