

Dropout problem gets lost in numbers

Here's a brief quiz:
Can you name the developing nation with the following education problems?

- 1 in 5 ninth-graders fail to graduate from high school.
- 2 in 5 minority students fail to graduate on time.
- 170 students drop out each day.

Here are your choices: Somalia, Afghanistan or Timor-Leste.



All three of these countries are suitable candidates because all have well-documented problems serving their citizenry, most notably their children.

In reality, this is a trick question.

The answer isn't a country at all. It's a commonwealth — Pennsylvania.

Yes, Pennsylvania.

Our state ranks in the bottom 10 of all states in graduation rates.

The recent budget stalemate certainly allowed for a robust debate about public schools and the challenges we face as a commonwealth in educating millions of children every year.

To be sure, the challenges are daunting, and the media did an excellent job bringing the education issue to the forefront.

Isn't the goal of education to graduate with the skills to be successful in a career and in life?

Yet Pennsylvania's severe dropout problem never seems to make headlines.

Clearly, it should.

It is startling that one of America's largest and most economically successful states could have such problems, but dropout rates know no socio-economic or physical boundaries.

As we near the time when we turn our attention to the 2010-11 state budget (it's going to be here before we know it), all

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However, the statistics surrounding Pennsylvania's dropout problem clearly make a direct link to crime, health problems, unemployment and a loss in tax revenues — issues that touch all of us and cost Pennsylvanians billions every year.

state policy makers must acknowledge this problem and shape their policy goals to address it.

Whether we like it or not, every dropout has an effect on every Pennsylvania taxpayer. It isn't just a school problem. It's everyone's problem.

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You really don't have to look further than crime and the subsequent cost in operating our state prisons.

Pennsylvania's state prison system accounts for one of the largest expenditures each year.

In 2008, state taxpayers spent \$1.84 billion (or 6.8 percent of the state budget) on incarcerating criminals.

When you peel back the numbers, you find that about 75 percent of inmates do not have a high school diploma. That means

three out of every four Pennsylvanians in our state prisons failed at some point to complete their education — in a system that receives billions of dollars each year.

Other numbers are alarming as well.

The mortality rate for adults without a high school education is 2.5 times higher than those who graduate; and dropouts are four times more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates.

In addition, the annual losses in income taxes for America's dropouts exceed \$50 billion — dollars that are desperately needed as our state and federal governments continue to deal with an uncertain economic future.

The time has come for all of us to find out why we are failing to finish the job in educating every single child — and to do something about it.

The solution must be a collaborative effort that includes the families of our at-risk students, as well as educators, social-service providers and local community leaders. The answers lie not only in our schools, but in our local, community-based organizations and groups.

The Communities In Schools model advocates for comprehensive services to be made available from a variety of resources so that any and all needs of students can be met and the child can succeed.

That can only happen if our state policy makers and lawmakers provide the resources needed to meet this ever increasing need.

We can invest in solutions now — or continue the status quo and watch many of our children struggle in an education system ill-prepared to meet their needs.

Choosing the latter option will cost us a great deal more than money — it will cost us our future.

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