



Friday, March 28, 2008

**Iris K. Salters: Labor Voices**

## **Michigan must confront dropout epidemic**

### **Denying driver's licenses won't solve problem of students who leave early**



As you read this, tens of thousands of teens and adults across the nation -- many in Michigan -- are leaving high school before earning diplomas. They are neighbors, customers, family members, voters, prisoners, church members and elected leaders.

And, sadly, they are part of a growing population. During this school year, about 20,000 Michigan teenagers will join the ranks of dropouts.

Across the United States, more than half a million children will drop out of school this year, according to some estimates. To put the crisis in perspective, high schools are losing more than 60 students per hour.

Over a year, that's about the same as the number of people who live in Fort Worth, Texas. It's more people than will be diagnosed with breast cancer or Parkinson's disease or HIV/AIDS -- combined -- in America in 2008. And more than were displaced or left homeless when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans.

Yet, as vast as the dropout epidemic is, it isn't a crisis that attracts notice that might result in meaningful solutions. The dropout crisis lacks a Michael J. Fox, Angelina Jolie or Harry Connick Jr. to help advocate for -- and draw attention to -- those in need.

Too many teachers, school board members, parents, community members, policymakers and others continue to fail some of our neediest children because they don't know how to tackle such a daunting task.

But while the school community cannot end the dropout crisis alone, often schools -- and

teachers, in particular -- are blamed.

Michigan has not properly addressed the problem, claiming it's too complex to solve. Even as families get ready to celebrate the graduation of thousands of public school students this summer, the silent dropout crisis continues, largely ignored.

Granted, a few ideas are in the works to address the issue, but they seem to be more stick than carrot, such as one proposal to prevent school dropouts from getting driver's licenses. Proponents of such punitive plans argue that most young adults need a valid driver's license to get where they're going. More will stay in school, supporters say, because they need a license to lawfully drive.

I appreciate that policymakers and others are trying to address high dropout rates because the impact on society is huge -- lower incomes for dropouts, local communities with fewer educated, well-paid employees filling skilled jobs to support local businesses, and a state that can't seem to get out of its economic doldrums.

But I'm disappointed, too, because threatening to deny licenses for high school dropouts doesn't address the myriad reasons why students don't graduate. Complex problems aren't usually solved with incomplete solutions.

The diploma-for-license idea does not help:

- Teenage parents who must work to support their families.
- Children who are depressed or who have disabilities.
- Schools that need to improve the learning environment with proven instructional strategies, high expectations for every student, or relevant curriculum.
- The families of would-be dropouts, including those who don't speak English as a primary language and those whose parents didn't graduate from high school themselves, by helping to build good parent-child relationships and providing other supports necessary to boost student achievement.

Yet, these are the kinds of issues that need to be addressed if we are to reverse dropout rates.

As a public education advocate, I know that our public schools do a good job preparing most students for jobs or college. But I also know there are some children our schools haven't reached in a way that keeps them connected to school until completion.

It's imperative that we all join to help stop the exodus. No one strategy or reform model will work for all schools or all students. We shouldn't back down from trying to fix the problem or delay acting because it's too hard to solve.

I'm hopeful that we can improve graduation rates. One place to start is with frank discussions about the dropout crisis.

Working together, we can identify realistic solutions. Our children's futures depend on it.

*Iris K. Salters is president of the Michigan Education Association, a union that represents teachers and education support staff. Fax comments to (313) 222-6417 or e-mail to [letters@detnews.com](mailto:letters@detnews.com).*

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.detnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080328/OPINION03/803280305>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© Copyright 2008 The Detroit News. All rights reserved.