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**Iris Salters: Labor Voices**

## **Make graduation a higher priority**

### **Creating network of successful programs could better fight state's dropout problem**



In the coming days, a new state report will shed more light on the status of Michigan's dropout crisis. But no matter what the numbers say, we have a serious problem that we must work on together for the sake of our children, our communities and our economy.

As we await what promises to be a more consistent reporting of graduation rates across the state, we can safely assume that there will be ups and downs. While having consistent numbers to help measure the problem is certainly useful, we can't lose sight that even schools with the smallest number of dropouts have a responsibility to tackle this problem.

One dropout is too many. Without a high school diploma, these young people will have difficulty in securing quality employment and housing. Many dropouts place avoidable burdens on law enforcement, state assistance programs and social service agencies. And worst of all, many will pass along their negative school experiences to their children and grandchildren, perpetuating a damning and damaging cycle.

During the first round of dropout crisis hearings held this spring by the Michigan Education Association and several partners, three key themes seem common to success in graduating more students.

First, children need to feel adults care about them. They need strong relationships with adults both in and out of school. And we need to prepare those adults to connect with children effectively, whether they are parents, community and faith leaders, teachers, counselors or other school employees.

Second, students need guidance in connecting the dots between their education, their

interests and their future. Students learn differently and deserve an education that meets their needs -- not a one-size-fits-all approach.

Finally, we need to accept and understand that this is not simply a high school problem, but rather something that we must address from an early age and throughout students' academic careers.

In the hearings we've conducted thus far, we've heard about countless programs that are making a difference.

We heard from school employees who spend one evening a week meeting with students and their families in a donated apartment at a large housing complex where many of them live.

There are virtual learning systems designed to help teen mothers and other dropouts continue their education outside the classroom, and other school setups that provide needed flexibility for students to engage and succeed in their education.

There are programs that train teachers how to forge relationships with teen-agers and workshops that develop the necessary skills for both elementary students and their parents to succeed in school from day one.

There are mentoring programs to ensure that at least one person in the school personally knows each student, their interests, their goals and offer the support they need to succeed.

As we hold another round of hearings during the next six weeks, we certainly expect to hear about more great programs. But it begs the question: If there are so many wonderful ideas that work, why do we still have a problem?

The answer comes down to coordination and commitment.

Despite their successes, the isolation of many of these programs limits their effectiveness. By learning what others are doing within a community, a strong network of programs can come together to keep students from falling through the cracks. Our communities -- large and small; urban, suburban and rural -- must make the commitment to unite, share resources and make graduating students from high school a priority.

One such opportunity presents itself in the Oct. 20 Dropout Prevention Leadership Summit in Lansing, where community, business, education and parent leaders will identify how they can combine and coordinate local efforts to stem the dropout crisis.

There are certainly things our leaders in Lansing can do to help these community efforts, which is why we will provide Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the Legislature with the thousands of pages of testimony we are gathering at the dropout hearings.

With this vast community input, data to identify the extent of the problem, meaningful policy changes from Lansing and commitment from everyone with a stake in our students' success, we can improve graduation rates and prepare students for 21st-century jobs to drive our economy for years to come.

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