

Bill addresses dropout problem

Recent statewide high school graduation rates indicate that far too many Indiana students are being failed by the system and missing out on their best chance for a future.

As we have talked about before in this column, on average, Indiana schools have historically reported graduation rates of 90 percent. But that figure fails to include students who drop out over the summer.

National data shows the more accurate rate is about 74 percent, or 20,000 dropouts a year. This figure puts Indiana in the middle of the pack nationally and fourth of the five states in our region, behind Illinois, Ohio and Michigan and slightly ahead of Kentucky.

Even more startling, the Indiana Commission for Higher Education calculates that some urban Indiana high schools, including certain high schools in Indianapolis, Gary and Fort Wayne, have graduation rates of less than 50 percent. According to the commission, one Indianapolis high school has a graduation of barely better than 10 percent.

The sad truth is that students who drop out of school are destined for difficulty in life. Studies show that high school dropouts are much more likely to end up poor, homeless or in jail. In fact, the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research indicates that more than 80 percent of prison inmates are high school dropouts. Those results are not only devastating for individuals, but they also create long-term costs to society.

Last year, the legislature offered some help for this problem. We increased the presumptive age that a person can drop out of high school in Indiana from 16 to 18. We required students who drop out to sign an informed consent form describing the common consequences of their decision, which include poverty, homelessness and crime. And, we created a work-flex program giving high schools the flexibility to offer half-day education programs for students who need or want to work while finishing their high school education.

It was a solid start, but this year we hope to do much more. This week, I was excited to receive a unanimous vote in the House Education Committee for House Bill 1347. This bill provides further solutions to the dropout problem by increasing the difficulty of dropping out and offering alternative solutions to standard high school.

The bill creates a waiver for students who can demonstrate financial hardship or a health reason for dropping out of school. But as a general rule, students who drop out before age 18 would lose work permits and driver's licenses. A local juvenile judge may also give permission for a student to withdraw for extraordinary circumstances.

Moreover, in an effort to provide positive alternative programs for Hoosiers without a diploma, House Bill 1347 authorizes Ivy Tech Community College, Vincennes University and other public and private colleges to offer a high school completion program for stu-



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dents 19 or older. If a student participates, he or she will be allowed to simultaneously enroll in a certificate or associate degree program.

In addition, H.B. 1347 creates a dual college credit program for all of Indiana's high school students, allowing Indiana's community colleges and universities to team up with high schools to offer college credits in the high school classroom. In its current form, this program would provide free college credits to any student who is enrolled in the program and is currently eligible for the free and reduced lunch program.

Critics of these programs say that some children are simply "troublemakers," and it is not fair to anyone to require these students to stay in school. However, with reported dropout rates as high as 25, 35 or even 50 percent, it is difficult to believe that one-quarter to one-half of our students are simply troublemakers or unreachable. There may be a few students who are too difficult to deal with, but most don't fit that category.

We can and must do better. High school dropouts are entering society every day, and they are entering society without the skills they need to compete. We need to push these students to stay in school, and we need to push our school systems to keep these students in the process longer.

Some students are legitimately failing in school, but others are simply being failed by the system. And, that is not a good result for anybody.

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