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A harsh reality for dropouts

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News about high school dropouts is rarely good, but new data and a devastating, highly detailed new report paint a bleak picture. Even though 80 percent of Massachusetts students graduate from high school in four years, some schools and districts are struggling. They've graduated fewer than half the freshmen who entered in 2002, creating a festering problem that policymakers must solve.

The data about the class of 2006 come from the Massachusetts Department of Education. And the worst findings are not surprising. Urban areas lag with a graduation rate of 62.3 percent. Minority students, especially boys, are less likely to graduate. The rate for black males is 57.5 percent. For Hispanic males it's 51.2 percent.

True, some students will graduate in five years instead of four. Others will get equivalency diplomas. But 11.7 percent have dropped out. They face a long list of threats, according to the report from Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies.

The report is blunt, declaring that "economic doom is indeed written on the brows of many Boston and Massachusetts high school dropouts unless public policies are developed to improve their schooling, academic and occupational skills, and employment prospects in the immediate future."

One danger is low wages. On average, dropouts have lifetime earnings of \$765,000, much less than the \$1.2 million earned by high school graduates. And it's tougher for dropouts to advance because they tend to get jobs with fewer training opportunities. Dropouts are more likely to rely on public benefits and spend time in jail. They are less likely to get married and more likely to have children out of wedlock. They report having worse health and are less likely to vote. So even living in their own neighborhoods, they can become economic and civic outsiders.

But this fate isn't inevitable. "We're gonna go get them," says Neil Sullivan, head of the Boston Private Industry Council.

The council has two outreach workers, Emmanuel Allen and Marvin Moore, both former dropouts, who have worked with hundreds of current dropouts. Allen says students leave school for many reasons, but a common theme is that school seems irrelevant. "School has to be a personal buy in" for students, he adds, saying schools should do more to show students what their futures could be.

Cities and schools can't go it alone. Massachusetts should set up more programs that pull dropouts back into school and help them become productive workers. Over time, this would generate more tax revenues and lower dropout-related costs, such as jail and food stamps. Buried in this educational crisis is the chance to make great progress.

Sullivan wants to cut the high school dropout rate in half in five years. With effort, Massachusetts could do even better. ■

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