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DOWNTOWN

Two Bostons

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By Steve Bailey, Globe Columnist | May 9, 2007

Last Wednesday, a beautiful spring day, I had lunch with a friend at the Four Seasons at a table with a picture-postcard view of the Public Garden. That evening, champagne glass in hand, I was at the lively annual gala of the French American Chamber of Commerce at the Langham Hotel. In between I was on Dorchester Avenue, talking with a couple of kids who are hanging onto school -- by a thread.

The contrast was jarring to say the least. Four miles separates the expense-account elegance of those downtown hotels and the Dorchester Youth Collaborative, the dilapidated teen drop-in center that Emmett Folger has somehow managed to (barely) keep afloat for 25 years. Four miles doesn't begin to capture the distance between Boston's haves and have-nots.

I went to find out why kids would be so stupid as to quit high school, as sure a bet to Loserville as any you can find. But talk to some of these kids awhile, and dropping out starts to make sense -- is almost inevitable. In fact to graduate, with so much stacked against them, can seem almost heroic.

The names of these two friends -- both black, male, and 16 -- are less important than their stories. They're kids after all.

One was incarcerated for months after being arrested on a gun charge with his older brother, a dropout who remains in jail. His older sister is also a dropout. His mother, he says, lost her apartment while the brothers were in jail, and he now lives with his aunt, who insists he remain in school. He calls school "boring." He wants to get a job -- where, he doesn't have a clue.

His friend lives with his older sister, who dropped out of school and has two children. His older brother, also a dropout, is in jail. He feels bad about disappointing those at his school who have tried to help. He says: "All the things going on in my life is kind of messing me up. I just want to get school over with."

For an economy dependent on human capital, the numbers are frightening. Statewide, 1 in 5 students in the class of 2006 didn't graduate on time, according to Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies. Nationally the story is even worse. In Boston, 2 in 5 didn't graduate. Race, gender, and geography matter. In Boston, only 48 percent of black males and 43 percent of Hispanic males graduate on time. Weston graduated 99 percent of its male students; in Lawrence that number was 34 percent.

Research by Northeastern economist Andrew Sum shows that dropping out correlates to all the wrong stuff. Dropouts are likely to be poor, more likely to have children out of wedlock, less likely to get married, more likely to go to jail, and will die sooner. In Sum's grim statistical portrait of the dropout, there is surprising hope, however. Consider:

The median annual earnings among white male high school dropouts nationwide, age 20-29, was \$14,269 in 2005. Among black male high school dropouts the number was an incredible \$2,038, a reflection of how few are working. But get black men through college and something remarkable happens: Their median annual income jumps to \$29,537 compared to \$30,576 for white males. The income gap nearly disappears, education being the great leveler.

For too long our economy has regarded dropouts as so much waste, more cheaply ignored than reclaimed. Yesterday there was a hearing at the State House on Massachusetts' invisible dropout crisis, and there are few issues that should concern us more, as an economy and as a society. The cost of fixing what is broken will be high and is about a lot more than just fixing schools. But the cost of not fixing it is even higher.

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