

## The high costs of dropping out

The media's sometimes fickle spotlight has once again shone on graduation rates, and – by most accounts – the situation is dire. Twelve percent of high schools across the nation have been labeled “dropout factories,” and the media have provided ample coverage of this designation.

To read these latest headlines, you would never know that the trend toward graduation has consistently increased for as long as the United States has gathered data on the education levels of its citizens. According to the U.S. census report, 75% of the adults over the age of 25 did not have a complete high school education in 1940. By the year 2000, the percentage had more than reversed; 80% of adults over the age of 25 had earned at least a high school diploma.

Our public schools accept students from all walks of life, with every conceivable family circumstance and facing the full spectrum of physical, mental and emotional health. We've also consistently raised the bar; teachers today must cover more subjects with a greater level of accountability. Despite these challenges, our nation's schools are helping more students reach a more meaningful graduation than ever before.

This is not to say that public schools should take a victory lap and rest on their accomplishments. Schools must continue to reach, teach and graduate more students because the stakes are so much higher now.

Our society has undergone an almost unfathomably dramatic shift in the last three or four generations. Back in 1940, most adults (including the 75% without a high school diploma) were able to find work that supported a middle-class lifestyle. The skills required to find a job were more technical in nature, since much of the available work was in the construction, assembly, and service industries.

Today, a high school dropout faces a distinctly uphill battle to find even minimal employment. The earning power of Americans without a high school diploma has been in an almost continuous decline for the last three decades. There are fewer entry-level jobs available and most of them now require at least basic literacy and computer skills.

Schools must continue to raise the bar for themselves just to keep up with the rising expectations of this and future generations' job market. The vast majority of today's jobs require advanced skills along with the ability to think well, communicate well and solve problems independently.

### **Dropping out is an expensive choice:**

- ➔ According to the 2005 U.S. Census report, the average annual income for a high school dropout was \$16,485 in 2004. Dropouts earn:
  - Nearly \$10,000 less per year than the average high school graduate (\$26,156), and
  - More than \$30,000 less per year than someone with a Bachelor's degree (\$49,656).
- ➔ The 2001 unemployment rate for adults over 25 without a high school diploma was 7.2 percent. That figure dropped to 4.2 percent for high school graduates without any college and to 2.3 percent for those with a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics).

*(Over)*

- ➔ High school graduates live longer and healthier lives. Those who graduate from high school live about 9.2 years longer than high school dropouts (Wong, Shapiro et al. 2002; Muennig et al. 2005).

### **Costs of dropping out extend beyond the individual**

High school graduation directly impacts an individual's overall wealth and accumulation of assets, thus affecting his or her ability to deal with a crisis like sudden unemployment or a disabling medical condition and dramatically increasing the likelihood that he or she will need some form of public assistance.

- ➔ The Alliance for Excellent Education cites research conducted at Princeton University which shows that each dropout costs the nation approximately \$260,000 in reduced tax revenue and increased health and social justice costs over his or her lifetime (Rouse, 2005).
- ➔ 75 percent of America's prison inmates are high school dropouts (Harlow, 2003). It costs more than \$22,000 to incarcerate a person for one year; by comparison, a year of education costs an average of just over \$9,000.

#### Additional References:

United States 2000 Census Brief, "Educational Attainment: 2000"

<http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-24.pdf>

Alliance for Excellent Education, [http://www.all4ed.org/federal\\_policy](http://www.all4ed.org/federal_policy)

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*Contributed by: J.Marie Riche, Ideal Communications, communications consultant*