

High School Dropouts: South Carolina's Legacy

The continued trend of high school dropouts in our public schools has placed South Carolina in a precarious position for its policy in dealing with what will be a costly legacy.

There are a number of organizations that examine and report on dropout rates for South Carolina. The most recent data analysis indicates the cohort graduation rate of the class of 2007 was 55.87 percent. For 2006 the percentage was 50.43 and for 2005--48.71. Between 2004 and 2007, South Carolina has averaged graduating only 51.7 percent of those who enter the ninth grade on time. As a statewide aggregate, those completion rates amount to more than 129,000 children who have dropped out of a public school in South Carolina over the last four years. Although the most recent data indicates a modest improvement, this rate will need to accelerate substantially in the near term.

South Carolina has a pattern with troublesome implications for our future as the state continues to absorb those dropouts into the economy. With the current U.S. economic trend showing a decline, the tax base in S.C. is particularly compromised by the reduced income that dropouts are known to earn and put back into the local economy as a tax base. This ripple effect will continue to be a strain on our state's development until we significantly improve our intellectual capital (our youth's education).

There is a preponderance of evidence that shows S.C. largely trails the U.S. in high school completion rates. Our rate of school improvement must rapidly outpace our competitors which now include students from Asian, European, Hispanic and other developing nations. High school graduates once only had to compete with local graduates for high paying jobs. The youth, educators and policy makers of S.C. now must reconcile the fact that we compete for economic development with a global community.

This is particularly significant since secondary school dropout rates in many developed nations are as low as the single digits. In terms of developed nations, the U.S., despite our prosperity, is actually behind many countries in the proportion of students we graduate from secondary school. Research indicates that many developed nations abroad will have secondary dropout rates as low as the single digits. South Carolina's dropout rate has averaged in the double digits for a number of years.

In our state we compare local school dropout rates to our district peers. There are 210 high schools in South Carolina and we award roughly 32,000 diplomas each year. Nationally there are some 23,000 high schools. South Carolina high schools represent less than 1 percent of all secondary schools nationally, but contribute more than 5 percent of all dropouts. Currently we average losing more than one hundred students for every high school in the state.

There must be greater urgency in our efforts to reverse the trend of high school dropouts in S.C. The unfortunate legacy of failure could be that this generation of youth may be the first since World War II that is no longer more prosperous than their parents' generation.

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