



School dropout data should bring changes

Springfield Republican

By Jim Stergios

The recent release of school dropout data by the Department of Education should serve as a call for sweeping change in our urban school districts. DOE reported that at least 40 percent of black and Hispanic students in Massachusetts currently either drop out or fail to meet graduation requirements.

When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, the country feigned shock at the "discovery" of a permanent underclass that was stuck in New Orleans. The same is true with the students relegated to a life of poverty in our urban school districts. With little education, dropouts face bleak job prospects. Far too many of them will soon find themselves on a path to prison – or worse.

In addition to being a human tragedy, dropouts drain public resources. Moreover, to compete in a global economy, the commonwealth needs a skilled and educated workforce. Urban districts make up over a quarter of the state's population; we can't afford to lose such a large portion of our talent base.

Dropouts and other stubborn education problems are particularly daunting in 14 cities - what you might call "Middle Cities" - outside the Boston area that range in population from about 40,000 to 175,000 residents.

Statewide, nearly two-thirds of public school students score "Advanced" or "Proficient" on the 10th grade MCAS English language arts exam. But in Middle Cities, the range is from 29-55 percent. While the statewide dropout rate is less than 4 percent, it's more than one third in Middle Cities such as Springfield, Holyoke, Fall River and Lawrence.

The commonwealth doesn't have a lot more money to pour into these school systems. Most of their school funding already comes from the state - in some cases, 80-90 percent. Overall, the 14 cities account for 18 percent of the commonwealth's population, but receive 38 percent of total local aid.

The rest of the country is experimenting in urban districts - and showing signs of success. In the 1990s, school choice programs in Cleveland and Milwaukee provided opportunity for low-income families in those cities. More recently, the state of Pennsylvania took over Philadelphia's schools and contracted operation of 45 of them out to entities like private operators and universities. Washington, D.C. has used enhanced choice and charter schools to turn its system around, and New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer has endorsed raising the statewide cap on charters from 100 to 250.

As was done in Milwaukee, Cleveland, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia and New York, the time has come for a fresh approach to improving student achievement in our Middle Cities. One way to do that is to provide incentives for improved performance by tying a portion of local aid to achievement in the schools.

Benchmarks would be based on improvements over the city's past performance in areas such as MCAS scores, dropout rates and school attendance. The benchmarks would be weighted, with MCAS, for example, assigned more importance than attendance in measuring overall performance. School districts that achieve the benchmarks could receive up to a 3 percent increase in local aid, while those failing to achieve them would see their aid cut by a similar amount.

Instead of telling municipalities how to solve their often-unique problems, benchmarking allows local officials to determine the best method for improving performance and rewards them for results.

If a district continually fails to meet benchmarks, the next step would be for local officials to choose from a menu of turnaround options. These would include more charter schools, university-school partnerships, expanded METCO-like programs under which students could attend schools in surrounding towns, introduction of private management companies and yes, even scholarship vouchers.

After 13 years and more than \$40 billion in state investment since the Education Reform Act of 1993, leaders can no longer turn a blind eye to the plight of Middle Cities. A generation of students later, we need to act like grown-ups and face the fact that significant change is needed. The time for talk is over. It is time to recognize that money talks and tie a portion of local aid to school performance.

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