



Fighting truancy

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The figure is stunning.

In the past 10 years, 6,429 York County students have dropped out of school. That's four children a day, leaving school before graduation. For the 2005-2006 school year, according to YorkCounts, the high school graduation rate in York County was 78 percent. The Penn State football program had a higher graduation rate.

That's pretty dismal.

At best, people who drop out of school face a life of poverty and deprivation; at worse, they face a life mired in the criminal justice system and in prison.

The human cost is unacceptable.

York County Senior Judge John C. Uhler sees it every day in his work in juvenile court.

"I look into the eyes of those kids," the judge said, "and see the future isn't there for those kids."

And even for those whose hardened hearts can dismiss that cost, the economic cost is also unacceptable.

Four out of ten adults who do not have a high school education receive government assistance. Those who wind up in prison cost much more. It costs \$23,100 a year to incarcerate a child in York County, as opposed to \$7,835 to educate that child.

Long term, the economic cost is more devastating. A 2007 Columbia University study concluded that converting a dropout into a high school graduate would yield a benefit of \$209,000 in higher tax revenues and lower government spending. The economic benefit represents a 250 percent return on the initial investment of tax dollars. YorkCounts calculated that if the students who dropped out over the past 10 years had graduated, the community would have been \$816.5 million ahead.

The causes of the high dropout rate are complex and varied. Viewed in the simplest terms, though, it begins early, with truancy in elementary school. Last year, according to Judge Uhler, founder of the York County Truancy Task Force, there were 215 habitually truant first-grade students in York County. Nearly one-third -- 31 percent -- of ninth graders in York County are habitually truant.

Today's habitually truants are tomorrow's drop-outs.

The answers are just as complex and varied.

YorkCounts has proposed a number of steps to reduce truancy and drop-out rates, including

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expanding the work of the truancy task force to include more cooperation among the various agencies that can help combat the problem. Typically, a kid dropping out of school is merely a symptom of a more deep-seated dysfunction. The causes have to be addressed, whether they be family problems, substance abuse issues or mental health concerns.

YorkCounts is taking the right steps, bringing together representatives of government, education and the business community to put together a plan that identifies the causes of truancy and high drop-out rates and develop a plan to address them.

If these initiatives are to be more than window dressing, it's going to take some effort and money to put them into place. YorkCounts estimates that improving graduation rates for York County schools could cost as much as \$4.5 million for the first year and \$3 million annually.

Considering the costs, both economic and human, it will be worth it.

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