

## **A Plan to Cut the High School Dropout Rate**

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High school graduation rates are universally seen as a barometer of success, or failure, in education. Parents, college admissions officers, even savvy real estate agents rely on that particular statistic to tell them if a school is any good.

But just as it takes a village to raise a child, graduation rates in New Jersey and elsewhere have also become a measure of the larger community outside the school and whether its politicians, civic leaders, business executives and even police officers are all doing their job as well.

Last week, Gov. Jon S. Corzine and state officials announced a yearlong, multiagency initiative to boost the state's graduation rates. Called the New Jersey High School Graduation Campaign, it will be led not by the state's Department of Education but by the state attorney general's office, with funds from businesses like Verizon and Prudential, among others.

The idea is to keep young people in school not just for their own good, but also as a pre-emptive strike against violence and gang activity.

As Governor Corzine put it in a news release, "the aim is to ensure that kids are headed in the right direction and not falling into the trap of a life of crime. Staying in school is one of our best crime prevention tools, and it requires the collaborative efforts of all of us to make it happen."

New Jersey has one of the lowest dropout rates in the nation, with 2 percent of the high school population reported as dropping out of school in 2007, according to the State Education Department. Even so, that leaves thousands of students every year who do not finish school.

New Jersey's campaign is part of a national effort to reduce dropout rates by America's Promise Alliance, a Washington-based children's advocacy group founded by Colin L. Powell in 1997. Since April, the group has awarded grants of \$25,000 to 14 states, including New Jersey and New York, to hold summits to develop communitywide plans for reducing dropout rates. The group's goal is to have summits in all 50 states by 2010.

Colleen Wilber, a spokeswoman for the alliance, said that dropouts are more than just a problem for schools, because those students are more likely to become a burden to society — ending up in jail, on welfare rolls or without any health insurance. According to the group's research, dropouts from the class of 2007 will cost the nation more than \$320 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity over their lifetime.

"We think that solving the dropout crisis is going to take the entire community," she said. "Not only is it important to have the schools and the parents, but it's also critically important for the business community, the faith community and the nonprofit groups to be there."

The New Jersey campaign, which is expected to cost about \$150,000, will be financed entirely by donations and grants from a cross-section of foundations, businesses and civic groups. Verizon gave

\$35,000; other supporters include P.S.E.&G., Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield, State Farm Insurance, Prudential and the New Jersey Chamber of Commerce.

Creighton Drury, an assistant attorney general who is overseeing the campaign, said that at least four regional meetings would be convened for school, community and business leaders to brainstorm about specific strategies for keeping students in school. For instance, he said, they will focus on reducing truancy by tapping into community resources to provide mentors or support programs, among other things.

Mr. Drury said the campaign would culminate in a statewide summit next October to promote the most effective practices, and to recommend educational policies to raise graduation rates. "We want to make sure that we're getting input and ideas from everyone so that this can be a true community and comprehensive effort," he said. "Raising awareness is the first step to addressing the problem."

William Firestone, an education professor at Rutgers University, said that community leaders could bring more financial resources to a school, run after-school programs that provide tutoring and develop skills, and promote stronger family ties. "There's a lot of evidence that family support is critical to success in schools," he said.

Irene Sterling, president of the Paterson Education Fund, an advocacy group for children in the Paterson schools, said the new campaign would send the message that dropouts are a shared problem. She said that poor urban districts like Paterson would particularly benefit from the community help because their schools have had to step in and provide social services for students when there is no one else.

"What the suburbs don't understand about their success is that it is the whole community that's making their school successful," she said. "They have a lot of involved parents, and they have parks and recreational programs. Urban students are dependent on their schools to deliver things that are delivered by others in the suburbs."