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The challenge ahead; Confronting the dropout problem with honesty is the first step among many that educators, government and the public must take.

Jacqueila Anderson began to turn her life around after coming to this realization: "I've never completed anything."

Anderson, who dropped out of Arlington High School, enrolled last year in Job Corps and has earned her GED. Hard times have not passed, however. She lost her \$8-an-hour job at Washington Inventory Services last month.

How can educators, state government and local communities reach the more than 20,000 Hoosiers who every year, like Anderson, quit school?

No easy answers exist. The dropout crisis is deeply rooted in societal problems such as poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, family turmoil and parts of the Indiana culture that do not place a high value on education.

Yet, there are crucial moves educators, state government and community leaders can -- and must -- make to keep more children from following the desperate paths of high school dropouts.

Educators

1. The first step is to tell the truth.

Education officials like state Superintendent of Public Instruction Suellen Reed have known for years that the graduation rates they report to the public are grossly inflated.

Their failure to speak out about low and declining graduation rates has masked the extent of the dropout epidemic and kept the public in the dark.

2. Local school boards and superintendents, especially in Indianapolis Public Schools, should write community contracts that set benchmarks for improvement. Business leaders, community organizations and the teachers union should set goals for their participation in helping improve schools. All should then communicate regularly with the public about the expectations set and progress achieved.

3. Teachers who are able to help at-risk students succeed should be better compensated than those working in less demanding environments. Teachers unions should allow administrators greater flexibility in rewarding teachers who take on the greatest challenges.

Also, the practice of intentionally dumping the least-experienced teachers into the most difficult classroom settings needs to end. It sets up both teachers and students to fail.

4. School districts and university schools of education need aggressively to recruit more black, Hispanic and male teachers. All teachers need improved training in

working with students from different cultural backgrounds.

5. School superintendents, principals and teams of teachers should meet regularly with at-risk students, especially black males, to hear their concerns and recommendations for improvement. Listening can go a long way in persuading students that someone cares about their future.

6. Districts, especially suburban schools on building binges, should reduce the frills and divert more dollars to remediation, tutoring and other programs that target at-risk students.

Mixing capital and operating budgets isn't allowed officially, but school administrators could expect few objections if they were to ask to divert construction dollars to pilot programs aimed at improving classroom instruction.

School officials argue that sports and other activities help engage students. That's true. But football teams can still take the field without schools erecting palaces like the \$4.3 million stadium built at Franklin Central High School last year.

State leaders

1. Indiana must place much greater emphasis on early childhood education. Money is undeniably tight, but Gov. Mitch Daniels and state legislators must give priority to full-day kindergarten and preschool opportunities for at-risk children.

The achievement gap among children begins to widen by the third grade. Early intervention, especially reading remediation, is essential to close the gap.

2. State lawmakers should allow for the creation of additional alternative schools, including charters.

Indianapolis Public Schools Pacers Academy is an alternative school helping to rescue a small number of students. Its methods, built around high-energy teachers and close relationships with students, should be expanded to other schools and districts.

3. Indiana needs a vocal leader to confront the challenge of its low graduation rate. Suellen Reed is in the right position to do it. She must, however, be more forceful and consistent in pointing out the educational system's problems.

Community

1. Volunteers are wanted. VISTA volunteers like Jamie Gibson and Kathy Souchet are helping turn at-risk students into leaders in IPS high schools. Tutors and mentors, many from the business world, are helping students learn to read.

But more are needed.

An important piece of reversing the dropout rate is finding individuals who can build strong relationships with students. Someone to ask about home life and homework.

Community groups, including churches and synagogues, have an important role in organizing volunteers and building bridges with schools and students.

2. Business involvement is critical. Executives need to work with educators in setting expectations and measuring outcomes. The business community has long complained about failing schools, but it must become a better partner in finding solutions.

3. Hoosiers must place greater value on the importance of education. Star editorial writers, in researching this series, encountered a startling number of students and dropouts from families in which no one had graduated from high school.

In other families, education has become secondary to sports and other activities that consume children's time. The importance of education appears for some to be slipping exactly when it's needed most for the health of the state and its young people.

Indiana's schools must improve. Its educators must adapt to change. Its political leaders must make targeted investments in education. Its community leaders and families must be better engaged in educating their children.

No less than the future of a generation is at stake.

Indiana's graduation rates

72% of all Indiana students graduated in 2002

53% of black students in Indiana graduated in 2002

50% of Hispanic students in Indiana graduated in 2002

75% of white students in Indiana graduated in 2002

Sources: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, the Urban Institute, Advocates for Children of New York, and the **Civil Society Institute**.