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High Dropout Rate Must Be State Focus

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It happens quietly every day. Students drop out of school after years of academic struggle, inadequate support, disinterest in education or challenging life events. They leave without the economic benefit of a high school diploma and begin a life potentially fraught with low-wage jobs and a need for state assistance.

The Alliance for Excellent Education reports that nationwide, more than 1 million of the students who enter high school annually do not graduate four years later. Connecticut's numbers are also a cause for concern — according to the Connecticut Coalition for Achievement Now, the class of 2011 lost approximately 9,000 students. In the long term — through factors such as higher incarceration rates, lower income and greater reliance on public assistance — students who drop out of high school cost the state approximately \$500,000 each over the course of their working lifetimes.

In the short term, these dropouts also strain adult education programs. A large number of recent dropouts use such programs to complete their secondary schooling. Adult education programs, however, are not equipped to deal with the behavioral and academic challenges these students often face. Instead, they are designed for older, more mature students. Adult Education programs have neither the resources nor the expertise to provide young students with the comprehensive support they frequently require. Many dropouts also overestimate the usefulness of the General Educational Development credential, as national studies show a significant gap between the earnings of high school graduate and individuals with a GED.

So, what can be done to address the dropout problem? There are two critical steps Connecticut can take to tackle this increasingly problematic issue.

First, Connecticut must increase the compulsory high school attendance age. Currently, Connecticut high school students can drop out when they turn 17. A bill introduced in the General Assembly during the last legislative session would mandate that students must remain in school until they complete high school or turn 18. This would be a good first step, both in getting students ages 16 to 18 out of adult education programs and increasing the number of students graduating with a high school diploma, rather than a GED certificate.

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Second, struggling students must be offered alternative education options. This is essential to alleviating the dropout problem.

In Hartford, Our Piece of the Pie, Inc. has developed alternative education programs that support each student's unique learning style. They are exemplified at Opportunity High School, Our Piece of the Pie's partnership project with the Hartford public schools. Programs such as this recognize that the traditional high school model does not work for all youth. It provides alternative learning opportunities while supporting and enabling disconnected students to re-engage them in education through individual attention, intensive support and college/career preparation to help them get on track to academic and employment success.

Alternative education programs should be available to all Connecticut students experiencing difficulty in a traditional school. Although many alternative education programs suffer from lack of available state funds, this can be alleviated by allowing the education dollars to follow the students to public schools where they are better served. This will allow these essential alternative programs to be adequately funded and will help to get many potential high school dropouts back on track.

Connecticut cannot afford to ignore solutions to the dropout problem. Adopting higher age requirements for compulsory school attendance and supporting alternative education options will help Connecticut's at-risk and struggling youth to succeed. These policies will ease the burden on adult education programs, while offering school-aged youths appropriate alternative education environments where they can thrive.

We urge state lawmakers to think about those 9,000 students who will drop out of Connecticut schools this year, and to consider policies that can change their path. Otherwise, their bright future could be the cost of our inaction.

Bob Rath is the president and CEO of Our Piece of the Pie, a youth development agency in Hartford.

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