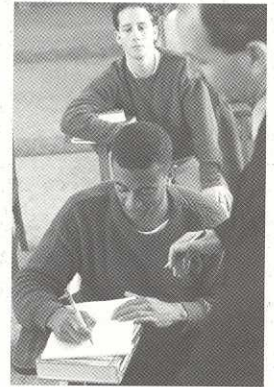




NEWSLETTER

The Superintendent's Leadership in Dropout Prevention

EVERY YEAR, COSTUMED STUDENTS ALL OVER THIS COUNTRY TAKE A WALK ACROSS A STAGE AND ARE AWARDED A TICKET FOR FUTURE GROWTH AND SUCCESS, A HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA. TOO MANY OF OUR STUDENTS NEVER MAKE THIS WALK, AND CONSEQUENTLY, THEIR LIVES PLAY OUT ON A VERY DIFFERENT STAGE. A DISPROPORTIONATE NUMBER OF THESE YOUNG PEOPLE ARE AFRICAN AMERICAN, HISPANIC, AND CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES. HOWEVER, CHILDREN OF ALL RACES, CREEDS, ABILITIES, AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS ARE REPRESENTED IN THE DROPOUT DATA.



Leadership of the Superintendent

Not unlike the formula for catastrophe films, there is in this script an impending danger that if not met and conquered, means certain destruction of personal lives and of our social and economic health as a nation.

Melodramatic you contend? Well consider for a moment that every year in this country a half million students drop out of school. Consider also a recent Manhattan Institute study (2003) that reveals an overall national high school graduation rate of 70%. Examine the parallels of those in our prisons who are illiterate and those without diplomas who are imprisoned in low-paying jobs. Examine the decreased lifetime earnings for dropouts over their graduated peers and the effects of this underutilization of human potential on our economy. Melodramatic? Maybe, but clearly our lack of success in assuring our children graduate from school is a major issue underlying many acute problems facing this country.

Leadership in our schools, particularly the leadership of the superintendent, is essential to achieving higher high school graduation rates. The superintendent must be the chief advocate for children at risk of failure.

Yet, leadership must be more than a single individual who rules the

roost. Top leaders must foster leadership at every level by creating an environment where reform can take place. This is not a simple task for superintendents at the state and local levels who are faced each day with a myriad of challenges.

The four superintendents featured in this issue of the *Newsletter* are providing strong leadership to reverse the trend of dropout. You will note in the four articles a remarkable similarity in their attitude of *can do*. You will discover how they are making a difference in their states, as Chief State School Officers and in their districts as district superintendents.

Mr. Gene Wilhoit, Kentucky Commissioner of Education, contends that our nation cannot afford a single dropout. He lists one key leadership role of chief state school officers as creating statewide awareness of the problem among all stakeholders and assuring policies and strategies that engage students and keep them learning at high levels.

Dr. David Flowers, Superintendent of Fargo Public Schools, focuses on systemic reform as key to dropout prevention. While Fargo has one of the highest graduation rates in the country, this superintendent has embarked on an ambitious plan to increase that rate by building a system that adapts to the needs of students.

Dr. Stephen Hefner writes about the alternative school as a building block to other alternatives. The lessons he has learned in the process of building alternatives for students at risk of not graduating will help others trying to build such student supports.

Dr. Henry Johnson, State Superintendent of Education in Mississippi, relates the role of leadership in creating awareness of the problem of students not graduating and challenges other leaders to put actions in place that support the rhetoric.

Truly, these superintendents understand more than the definition of leadership. These superintendents personify leadership in their everyday roles as state and school district leaders. There are many superintendents like them who believe that one person *can* make a difference, and they roll up their sleeves each day to do just that.

Reference

- Greene, J. P., & Forster, G. (2003). *Public high school graduation and college readiness rates in the United States*, Working Paper No. 3, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.

—Sam Drew, Ph.D., Guest Editor