

High schools in trouble

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Colorado's high schools haven't kept up with the times. Our dropout rate is the third worst in the country - and it is heading in the wrong direction. Reports show a 30 percent increase in dropout rates between 1996 and 2001. Of those students who do manage to graduate, only 29 percent take the minimum course work required to attend college.

While Colorado has embraced significant change in other areas of public education, now is the time to focus our efforts on improving high schools. The same basic structures that governed Colorado's high schools in 1955 are still in place today. Teachers mostly still teach in 50-minute blocks of time, and students move through a menu of courses offerings with little personalized support.

This way of running high schools has staying power because, for some of our students, it has worked fine. But, for some students in our best schools, and for most students in our worst-performing schools, the old approach is not up to today's needs. While teachers and leaders in our high schools are working hard, the systems of the mid-20th century weren't designed to deal with the challenges of the 21st century.

The situation is even more dismal for low-income and minority students. While the 2003 graduation rate for white students was 68 percent, it was only 44 percent for black students and 42 percent for Hispanic students.

We can and must do better.

In today's competitive job market, a college degree is fast becoming a necessity, not a luxury. Currently 80 percent of adults with bachelor's degrees are employed, as opposed to 60 percent of high school graduates and only 40 percent of high school dropouts. We owe our students every opportunity to succeed, and that means providing them with a better high school education and the opportunity to pursue higher education.

The Colorado Commission for High School Improvement was convened last summer and charged with "improving the prospects of Colorado's high school students." Given the facts and figures of the situation, it would have been easy to recommend some quick fixes and then claim success.

However, that is not what happened. Instead, this commission of 27 state and local leaders took an in-depth look at the challenges facing Colorado and then worked for more than six months to come up with a comprehensive set of detailed policy recommendations and specific strategies for implementing them.

The preliminary report is more than just a set of policy recommendations - it is a call to action.

The key recommendations of this bipartisan commission include:

- Creating one statewide standard for calculating high school graduation rates, so we can track and address the dropout rate and eliminate underreporting of the problem.
- Supporting a greater variety of public high school options that meet students' needs and learning styles in different ways and specifically replicating high schools that have been shown to hold on to students and prepare them for higher education and the workforce.
- Improving the data used to assess the performance of high schools so that policymakers, school leaders, parents and students can better evaluate their school's performance, know the real graduation rate and work to improve it. The same data will help students and their families make informed choices based on the quality of their public school options.

- Taking a comprehensive preschool-through-college approach to education, instead of separating K-12 from both preschool and higher education, to ensure that all students are given the education and opportunity to succeed.

- Enhancing school-level flexibility so teachers and principals can provide more personalized attention to all students, which will help them meet the particular needs and challenges of their local community.

These are significant and potentially controversial reforms, but they're also critically important to ensuring better outcomes for our students. Implementing these changes will require hard work and committed leadership on the part of state and local policymakers, but we can't afford to ignore this issue any longer.

The climate for reform is ripe. Gov. Bill Owens and President Bush both have initiatives focused on encouraging kids to pursue higher education. We applaud their efforts, but also know that if a child goes to college without an adequate high school education, they are doomed to fail.

We must position our students for success, not failure. We must give them the tools they need to succeed and support them in their efforts to get ahead. We must, at the very least, give them a high school education that empowers them to pursue a rewarding future.

We challenge state and local leaders to debate these recommended policy changes. But most important, we challenge them to take bold steps toward reform and make Colorado high schools a priority - today, tomorrow and for years to come. Our high schools must change or we will repeat our failures and condemn nearly one-half of an entire generation to go through life without a high school education or the job skills they need to succeed.

We know it won't be easy and it won't happen overnight. But with vision, commitment and persistence, we can ensure better educations and brighter futures for Colorado's kids.

To read the commission's report, go to

www.coloradosmallschools.org and click on the "Raising the Bar" link.

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