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By John Habat

Only 1 of 3 High School Drop-outs find Jobs

The economic vitality of Greater Cleveland and our ability to attract and retain employers rely heavily on our having an educated workforce. Unfortunately, research shows an unacceptable reality that must be changed.

A recent report by America's Promise Alliance (the foundation of Colin and Alma Powell) cited Cleveland's abysmal high school graduation rate as one of the worst in the country. While there is some discrepancy on the actual rate—whether it is 34 percent according to America Promise data, or 60 percent according to the Ohio Department of Education—it appears that far too many of Cleveland's youth are failing to achieve perhaps one of the most important milestones of their lives: a high school diploma.

The importance of a diploma is borne out in a comprehensive analysis of Cuyahoga County's workforce characteristics and demographics prepared by The Center for Community Solutions. The data paints a full picture of arguably the greatest challenge confronting workforce development in the county—and, perhaps, the *country*. To put it simply: high school drop-outs and their dependents are more likely to face a life of poverty. Rather than making positive contributions to the region's economy, they frequently end up consuming a disproportionate share of government resources. And their legacy may be a multi-generational cycle of poverty that continues the pattern in perpetuity.

This is not hearsay. The data portend this gloomy picture for high school drop-outs, and it's not a small group of individuals. Almost 25 percent of adults 25 years and older in Cleveland did not complete high school—that equals about 60,000 persons; for the county, the rate is 12.1 percent, or more than 107,000 persons.

An even more startling statistic is that only one out of three persons 25 and older who did not complete high school is currently in the workforce or actively looking for a job. Of this one-third, the unemployment rate is around 25 percent, the highest of any age group. What happens to the other two-thirds? Some pass the GED test and go to college. Others start families and stay at home with their children. Sadly, many end up involved in the criminal justice system.

The high unemployment rate among those without a diploma demonstrates that there are four low-skill applicants for every three jobs. Low-skill jobs are not being created here, so high rates of unemployment among this group will continue. However, there is a growing need for workers in mid-skill jobs—those that require some education and training beyond high school. In fact, there are more mid-skill jobs available than persons able to fill them.

While the current recession has harmed employment prospects for low-skill workers, the abundance of such workers and the lack of a sufficiently educated and trained workforce to fill existing jobs has been a drag on both our economic vitality and local resources.

Persons without a diploma have the lowest labor force participation rate, the highest unemployment, and the lowest income. Conversely, the more education one has, the higher the percentage of labor force participation, the lowest incidence of unemployment, and the highest per capita income.

With data this compelling, we need to be frequently reminded of the consequences of the failure to finish high school on the individual, the family, and the community. While the schools should not be blamed for the complicated set of demographics and issues that confront many of our youth today, they schools *should* be taking extreme measures to graduate every student who enrolls.

Are there signs of hope? Yes, according to America's Promise Alliance. Over 1,000 educators, parents, and leaders from the public and private sectors will convene in a summit organized by City Year Cleveland on May 22 to engage the entire community in assuring that all Cleveland students complete high school ready for college, work, and life. Another hopeful sign is The Cleveland Foundation's MyCom initiative that has targeted eight neighborhoods in Cuyahoga County to map existing resources for

proactive youth development and to identify key gaps where additional resources are needed. In addition, the federal government's stimulus package will enable several thousand teenagers to obtain jobs, earn some money, and learn some positive lessons about the importance of education to getting a good job.

The high school drop-out rate is daunting. It will require the entire community's unwavering commitment to turn the situation around. And it needs to be done now. Otherwise, high school drop-outs, their families, and the region will continue to suffer the short- and long-term consequences.

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