

When Kids Don't Graduate, We All Fail

It's important for your employees to know just how important a high school diploma is—not just to their children, but to all of us. Here's a 600-word article on that topic you can use in your company newsletter or on your Intranet:

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When the economy slows, most Americans—even those with college degrees and stable incomes—feel the pinch. But few are affected more by a sluggish economy than the under-educated.

In states like North Carolina that once were farming or manufacturing powerhouses, the problem is even more acute. It used to be that young people who didn't graduate from high school could find good jobs in textile mills or tobacco plants—jobs that allowed them to buy a house and support a family. These days, most of those good low-skilled jobs are performed overseas. With those jobs gone, high school dropouts have few options when looking for work. The positions most available to them pay minimum wage and offer scant or no benefits.

It's hard to achieve the American Dream making \$18,600 a year, which is the average salary for dropouts. But kids who drop out of school aren't just dooming themselves and their future spouses or children. They're also hurting us. Consider these alarming statistics:

- Because those who don't have a high school diploma are less likely to have a job with health insurance, hospitals and doctors often have to write off the cost of their care, costing those of us with insurance more.
- Because those who don't have a high school diploma are more likely to need public assistance, they drain our public coffers.
- Because those who don't have a high school diploma are more likely to engage in criminal activity than those who are better-educated, they increase the costs of our penal system and law enforcement agencies, which we ultimately cover with our taxes.
- Because those who don't have a high school diploma are less likely to be savvy about health and disease prevention, they live an average of nine years less than those who do have a high school diploma.

Dropouts also make us less competitive as a state and nation. Businesses want to hire skilled, literate workers. Consider this: Seven out of the 10 fastest-growing job categories require education beyond high school. Will companies want to locate these jobs in North Carolina if our workforce is underqualified?

Since North Carolina is currently graduating only about 70 percent of children who enter ninth grade, our labor pool will be seriously under-filled. We need all our young people to graduate from high school, at the very least, and most of them will need to go on to earn at least a two-year college degree to be qualified for tomorrow's knowledge-intensive jobs. If 30,000 or so young people enter adulthood in North Carolina each year without that all-important roll of paper in their hands, our state will become less and less competitive. And that means a weaker tax base, fewer options for our young people and a less secure future for us all.

So if your child or the child of a coworker, friend or neighbor is having trouble in school, get involved. Help them envision their future with and without an education. Give them some "tough love" by helping them see the kind of lifestyle they'd be limited to if they worked as a burger flipper or checkout clerk.

Most important, arrange for these teens to get help from their teachers, guidance counselors or principal before they become too discouraged and drop out. If they don't make the grade, how can we hope to succeed?

