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October 28, 2008

Our view: Future depends upon well-prepared high school grads

Of all the challenges this country faces today, the most disturbing news is this: "Among industrialized nations, the United States is the only country in which today's young people are less likely than their parents to have earned a high school diploma." That statement comes from "Counting on Graduation," an Education Trust report released last week.

A country filled with under-educated, unskilled labor is a country in poverty. The future job market has little room for the unskilled and untrained.

Jobs are becoming more technical, more specialized and require more training and focused skill sets. Without a high school education -- one that creates future workers capable of the further training needed for available jobs -- the future of our workforce is doomed.

In Louisiana 35 of every 100 high school students never make it to graduation day. We must change that number and the grim future it will provide. But how?

We should ask the dropouts.

The state Department of Education has set a goal to have 80 percent graduation rate in the next 10 years.

The state is working on programs to help stem the tide of dropouts. It is redesigning the high school curriculum to make it more relevant for the needs of the students and their future employers. It is partnering with business and industry to allow students to train for specific jobs for which there is a need.

The state has instituted a number of other programs including the Ninth Grade Initiative pilot program aimed at helping new high school students fit in, navigate, utilize a peer mentor and be more closely tracked for attendance, grades and such. The idea is that engaged and encouraged are more likely to meet with success and stick with high school. That's a good start.

But is it enough, soon enough? What do the dropouts think?

State and local education leaders and volunteer organizations will meet today at a "Louisiana's Promise" summit in Baton Rouge to begin drafting their own plan for decreasing the dropout rate.

That's a good thing. It never hurts to have more ideas brought to the table.

But where are the voices and ideas of the dropouts? Do you know who they are, what happened to cause them to drop out and what they add to the conversation about how to keep a student in school?

These children left behind may hold the key. Let's hope someone asks them.

- Summit information: http://www.louisianaschools.net/lde/comm/pressrelease.aspx?PR=1173