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ACHIEVE!



An Update on Student Retention Issues

This newsletter, published periodically, will provide information on various aspects of the student dropout problem, legislative issues relating to the crisis, prevention programs that the League has encountered, and ways to encourage student retention.

This issue of *ACHIEVE!* discusses the Interim Report to the 71st Legislature by the Joint Special Interim Committee on High School Dropouts and several other proposals before the legislature. These proposals are particularly important now as Texas' high dropout rate poses a grave threat to future prosperity.

SUMMARY OF INTERIM REPORT ON HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

Startling observations have been made by the Joint Special Interim Committee on High School Dropouts that will alarm even the greatest skeptics of the dropout problem. These findings include:

- Each dropout class costs the state \$17.1 billion in direct costs and economic losses.
- One out of every four first graders fail at least one test of basic skills in reading, writing or math, setting them on a path of failure leading to dropping out of school.
- More than three out of ten students do not finish high school.
- One out of every three Texans is functionally illiterate.
- Almost two-thirds of adults with incomes below the poverty level are high school dropouts. (The 1988 U.S. poverty level for a family of 4 was \$11,650.)

- Two-thirds of AFDC payments are made to individuals who did not complete high school.
- Over the course of the lifetime of the 1985-86 class of dropouts the losses in tax revenue average approximately \$60,000 per dropout.
- Almost 90% of the Texas prison population dropped out of school. Leaving school is an important factor in criminal behavior and incarceration.
- Texas leads the nation in teen pregnancies among girls ages 14 and under. Teen parents are not equipped to provide the skills necessary to promote academic achievement and later contributions to society.

The interim report acknowledges that the dropout problem is both complex and critical and requires both immediate "Intervention Strategies" and long-term "Prevention Strategies." A summary of the strategies recommended by the report follows. Bills that relate to the provisions of the report appear in parentheses after each strategy.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES

The committee recommends a number of short-term strategies that should be implemented immediately. One short-term strategy is to require each school district's at-risk coordinator to prepare a written plan detailing programs designed to reduce the dropout rate in the up-

coming school year. The plan then must be reviewed and approved by the school board (Related bill -- SB 152). A second strategy requires alternative education programs for pregnant and parenting school-age students in districts with low socio-economic status populations and/or which have 50,000 Average Daily Attendance (SB 151). The report expressed concern over assigning pregnant students to special education programs when the students did not otherwise qualify for access to those programs (SB 405, SB 151).

Another short-term method of combatting the problem would be for every school in the state to develop and maintain a campus-based parent involvement program that would include training in promoting student self-esteem, good study habits, and good communications between parents or guardians, students and school personnel (SB 205). The interim committee also recommended that every secondary campus identified as having 10% or more of its student population at-risk of dropping out implement programs based on the "Communities in Schools" model. This model, which has been used by the Houston and San Antonio ISDs, is "designed to increase school attendance, improve learning, encourage personal and social development and help students acquire skills which will allow them to obtain employment." The program promotes coordination with local and state agencies in order to provide direct services or referrals for at-risk students and their families at the campus site (SB 367). The staff of CIS are "on loan" from the social service agencies in the community and they offer counseling to the children and their families. Other benefits of CIS include tutoring, job-training, and possible summer employment.

In addition, curriculum credit should be given for a course on peer assistance and leadership.

The committee recognized peer assistance programs as effective. Pairing students together for tutoring purposes benefits both the student receiving assistance and the one giving aid. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) should work with the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse and the Peer Assistance Network of Texas to provide a trained and funded full-time peer program coordinator in each regional education service center (SB 598). Furthermore, an appointed, statewide media task force on dropout prevention should be established. This group would report to the 72nd Legislature (1991) and develop, distribute, and disseminate anti-dropout messages throughout the state. The media task force would also make recommendations on the viability of statewide coordination of the anti-dropout media efforts (SCR 43).

Another short-term strategy lowers the age of eligibility for participation in Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA)-funded programs designated for dropout prevention to 12 years of age and to work with other state officials to encourage federal officials to target 12- and 13-year-olds in the federal JTPA dropout reduction programs (SCR 21, SCR 26). Then, the Legislative Budget Board (LBB) should monitor and ensure full use of the federal

JTPA dollars. The governor should make dropout prevention an even higher priority for discretionary JTPA funds and should encourage each Private Industry Council (PIC) to reserve funding for dropout reduction programs that model other successful programs (SCR 25).

LONG-TERM PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Because of the substantial costs which dropouts place on society, one basic long-term goal should be to identify potential dropouts early in their

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elementary school careers and then better meet their needs. One program that school districts should establish is school-based child care for before and after school care for prekindergarten, kindergarten and elementary grade school children (SB 155). Furthermore, three-year old children whose family income is below the poverty level or who are otherwise potentially educationally disadvantaged should be eligible for a two-year prekindergarten program. (SB 246)

Because problems for students start at a young age, elementary school campuses in large districts (more than 3000 ADA) or with above 30% low socioeconomic status school population should employ a full-time guidance counselor. Smaller districts should employ part-time guidance counselors (SB 95).

In general, the committee found some model programs that work well and found other areas that could be improved by changes in state policy, law, and practice to help reduce the dropout problem. In light of the complexity of the issue, the committee should be continued by the 71st Legislature (SCR 13). The committee also recommended that TEA should give dropout programs a higher priority in its organizational structure and funding. (Thus far, there has been no legislation introduced to accomplish this measure.)

A final recommendation by Representative Glossbrenner dealt with letting students make up absences beyond the five days currently allowed by law in order to encourage students who have left school to re-enter (SB 500). Under the current system, once a student has excessive absences he or she can gain no credit for attending school during that semester.

OTHER PROPOSALS BEFORE THE LEGISLATURE

BILL TO DENY DRIVERS' LICENSES TO DROPOUTS

HB 766 filed by Rep. Lucio of Brownsville aims to use the privilege of driving to keep teenagers in school. The bill states that a driver's license shall not be issued to a person under the age of 18 who does not have a high school diploma or its equivalent unless the student is enrolled in a public or private school.

In addition, under the provisions of this bill dropouts are ineligible for instruction permits or restricted operators' licenses given to operate a motorcycle or motor-driven cycle.

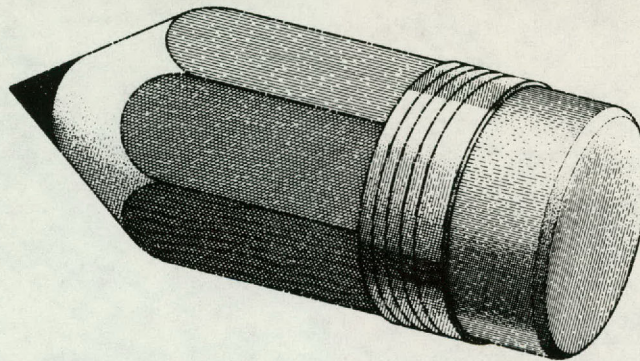
The schools would bear the responsibility of reporting to the Department of Public Safety the names of students ages 15-17 who are enrolled but have unexcused absences for 15 or more days or for 10 or more consecutive days in a given semester. These students would have their licenses

suspended until they became 18, obtained a high school diploma or its equivalent, or attended a public or private school for a full semester without an unexcused absence.

This act would take effect September 1, 1989, and would apply only to eligibility for a license issued on or after this effective

date. However, the provisions applying to suspension of a license for failure to remain in school and to eligibility for license renewal would apply to all licenses regardless of their issuance date.

A similar law in West Virginia requires students under the age of 18 who withdraw from school to surrender their driver's licenses within 10 days. The initial results of this law appear favorable. According to the West Virginia



Department of Motor Vehicles, 28% of the dropouts whose licenses have been revoked since September have returned to school. Several other states considered this idea during the 1988 session and Colorado and South Carolina will debate similar measures this year. Wisconsin already has provisions allowing the suspension of driver's licenses of habitual truants. A bill in California was approved by the Legislature but vetoed by the governor. While it is possible that the threat of losing one's license will keep teenagers in school, there is significant opposition to this idea. Many people believe that coercing young people back into school will not be productive in getting them to learn (Source: *State Legislatures*, March, 1989).

**BILL TO REQUIRE PRISONERS
TO OBTAIN DIPLOMAS**

HB 114 -- This bill introduced by Rep. Melton requires that all prisoners admitted to the Texas Department of Corrections that do not have a

high school diploma equivalency certificate or vocational training diploma must attain such a diploma or certificate before being considered for parole [Amends Section 8(e), Article 42.18, Code of Criminal Procedure].

BILL TO LENGTHEN SCHOOL YEAR

HB 298 -- This bill introduced by Rep. Wilson lengthens the school year from 175 to 214 days. Minimum days of attendance are also raised to 204 days for grades 1-12 and 102 days for kindergarten and prekindergarten [Amendments to TEC sections 16.052(a), 21.004, and 21.032].

BILL TO LIMIT CLASS SIZE

HB 555 -- This bill introduced by Rep. Repp limits enrollment in grades K-4 to not more than 22 students per class during the first six weeks of school. After the sixth week the number of classes may not be reduced if such reduction would cause more than 22 students to be in any one class.

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