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Traditional Education No Longer Enough

By John R. LaPlante

Congratulations to the class of 2008!

Now what can we do to make sure that the number of students who complete high school increases?

Recently, former Secretary of State Colin Powell put a spotlight on the problem of high school dropouts. His group, America's Promise Alliance, issued a report stating that in the country's largest school districts, the odds that a student who entered high school would leave with a diploma four years later were no better than coin flip. That, he said, is "a catastrophe."

It's easy for those of us who live in smaller cities and towns to think that high school completion is a problem only for big cities. It isn't. Dropouts occur everywhere, and every dropout represents a loss of human potential. People who don't finish high school are at a higher risk of poverty, welfare dependency, and a criminal record.

Powell's group reported on the 50 largest districts, but the database it used (compiled by Education Week) had information from nearly every district in the country. If you look into the database on a district-by-district basis, you'll find that fewer students make it through school than we thought.

There are several ways of calculating graduation rates, and it's in the interests of administrators and the other adults who run the system to use the method that shows the best possible outcomes for public schools. But that's not doing students any favors. The best way is to figure out how many students enter ninth grade and then leave high school with a diploma within four years.

According to the Kansas Building Report Card, the graduation rate for USD 489 Hays was 93 percent in 2003-04. But Education Week put the rate at only 80 percent. (This was the last year for which comparable numbers were available.)

Regardless of which picture is correct, something's got to change. Between 1994 and 2004,

per-pupil spending by the district increased 78 percent. So more money isn't the answer.

It's time for offering students new opportunities that can personalize education and make it more likely for all students to graduate. Virtual schools, which let students go online to take classes at their own pace, are growing in popularity. So are charter schools, which let innovative teachers and committed parents try new approaches.

Many schools are trying to do things the way they did 100 years ago.

That's no longer sufficient. In a changing world, Kansans deserve better.

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