

From dropout to jail

Written by Judge Greg Mathis
Monday, 19 October 2009 17:19

It's no surprise that high school dropouts fare far worse than their peers who graduate. From the lack of sustainable jobs available to them to the loss of income over the course of their lifetimes, a young person who fails to finish high school is at a serious disadvantage in society. One more issue dropouts have to contend with: they are more likely to wind up in jail or a detention center than those who earn their diploma.

A recent study revealed that about 10-percent of young males who dropouts wind up in jail. For African Americans, the percentage increases: 1 in 4 high school dropouts wind up incarcerated. For a little perspective on those numbers, consider that 1 in 35 high school grads and 1 in 14 white and Hispanic male dropouts wind up in jail.

Those who turn their backs on education, for whatever reasons, are not the only ones to loose out here. The U.S. government pays out \$292,000 over the working life of each dropout. This amount covers the loss of tax revenue, since dropouts typically earn less than the average American, the cost of incarcerating many of them and for providing food stamps and other aid due to unemployment.

Currently, 54 percent of dropouts ages 16-24 are unemployed. Among African American dropouts in that same age group, 69 percent are without work. There is a direct connection between the nation's dropout and incarceration and unemployment rates. Society will continue to pay a high price if nothing is done to reduce the dropout rate.

An integrated effort, that connects students, parents, schools and communities, is needed. Parents must not only instill the value of education in their children, but monitor their study and attendance habits and become a presence at the child's school. Young people owe it to themselves and their communities to take their education seriously. Schools must advocate for their students and work to get the best teachers and materials necessary. Communities must champion academic success and provide free tutoring and after school programs and mentoring for troubled youth. Government has a role as well. Elected officials must ensure local school districts have the funding they need to operate efficiently and effectively. Budget cuts and a tight economy should not affect a child's education.

If we don't work as a collective to dramatically reduce the nation's high school drop out rate, we will not only continue to layout funds to provide for citizens unable to fully contribute, we will also continue to loose young lives to the criminal justice system. And that is the biggest loss of all.

Judge Greg Mathis became the youngest judge in Michigan's history and was elected a Superior Court Judge for Michigan's 36th District. He has been called upon as a regular contributor to national television programs, including "Larry King Live," "Politically Incorrect," CNN's "Talk Back Live," "Showbiz Tonight" and "Extra" to discuss his opinions on complex issues of the day, such as national security, unique sentencing, affirmative action and celebrity scandals. He also offers his take on high-profile legal cases.