

guest commentary

Engaging student passion is key

By Damien Ewens

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As an educator I read with interest the recent study describing the dropout crisis in our cities and asked myself, what will come of it? Will there be renewed anger, urgency and commitment to address the dropout rate facing schools across the country? I hope so.

The study published last week by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center ("Cities in Crisis: A Special Analytic Report on High School Graduation") presents a well-known fact: our largest cities have failed to provide education and opportunity for their students. The study shows that the 50 largest cities in America have an average graduation rate of 51.8%.

The fact that half of these students are not graduating is beyond troubling. The study calculates "that more than one-quarter of a million students in the largest cities failed to graduate with a diploma in the class of 2007."

This is not a new problem. The average dropout rate has been about 30 percent for many years; dropout rates for African-America, Latino and urban students have exceeded 50 percent for many years.

Punitive accountability schemes and high stakes testing are clearly not the answer. In Texas, where the standardized test-based accountability system became the model for No Child Left Behind, 135,000 youth dropout every year and dropout rates are highest for African American and Latino youth, both hovering around 50% ("Avoidable Losses: High Stakes Accountability and the Dropout Crisis" Education Policy Analysis Archives).

The good news is that there are solutions that work and offer hope for all students. In every one of the cities mentioned in the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center report there are public schools that are working hard to keep their students in school and help them excel as students and members of their community.

It has been found that schools that offer more personalized learning environments where education takes place one student at a time with a curriculum that is relevant to the student and their community are not only graduating more students but have very few, if any, incidents of violence or other serious disciplinary problems.

One example of a successful model that is dramatically improving education for our nation's young people can be found in Big Picture Schools, a nonprofit education organization that has schools in 11 of the 50 largest cities in America including three high schools in Denver. Across Big Picture Schools' network of more than 50 schools, the high school graduation rate averages 92%.

Compare these high school graduation rates for regular schools in major cities: Denver 46%, Detroit 25%, Los Angeles 45% and New York 45%. Importantly, the student demographics in Big Picture Schools mirror those from the regular public schools.

These statistics are not unusual for innovative high schools that personalize education for their students. Teachers and students get to know each other in these schools. Kids are urged to find their passions and given the opportunity to do so. Students are engaged in their work so they are not bored and, therefore, do not create disciplinary problems.

Solutions and strategies exist to prevent dropouts. Why can't all students benefit?

Damien Ewens is Special Projects Manager at the Big Picture Company and a former teacher.

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