

Editorial: Look what state's high school system is failing now

A new report on Florida's 'dropout factories' highlights the need for innovation, competition

Wednesday, November 14, 2007

We're No. 2! Were that Florida's position in the BCS college football standings, it would be something to brag about.

Alas, the Sunshine State owns the dubious distinction of having the nation's second highest percentage of "dropout factories" — right behind South Carolina. According to an Associated Press-Johns Hopkins University survey, 163 of 319 Florida public high schools posted among the worst dropout rates in the country.

The findings confirm several earlier studies that cited Florida's lagging graduation rates. Last month, the Alliance for Excellent Education calculated that dropouts from the class of 2007 will, over their lifetimes, create a \$26 billion drag on Florida through lower incomes, greater use of public services and higher crime rates.

So let's be clear: This state's dropout problem isn't merely a matter of printing fewer high-school diplomas. It's an economic and demographic plague.

Three campuses on the Treasure Coast — Fort Pierce Central, Fort Pierce Westwood and Port St. Lucie High — were deemed "dropout factories" in AP-Johns Hopkins' three-year sampling. Two other schools — Martin County High and Indian River Alternative School — missed the mark for a single year.

If the Treasure Coast expects to diversify its economy and enrich its communities by attracting high-paying employers, the region's schools will have to do a better job of producing the requisite workforce. Dismal dropout rates lure only more bottom-feeding businesses that subsist on low-wage, low-skill labor.

St. Lucie faces the stiffest test, statistically speaking. The AP report found that minority-majority schools were five times more likely to be dropout factories — and St. Lucie has the highest concentration of minorities in the region. To its credit, the district isn't using race as an excuse. In its latest effort to turn things around, St. Lucie has launched technology-based academies at its high schools. This can be a positive step to improving the depth and breadth of vocational education.

Beyond that, there are competitive alternatives that broaden public education in fundamental ways. Here are three academic innovators that actually save taxpayer dollars:

- Charter schools rank among the fastest growing segments in public education statewide and nationally. Enrolling minorities at rates equal to or greater than

traditional schools, charters tailor programs to community needs while upholding state standards. As the Treasure Coast grows, charters should flourish, as well.

- Florida Virtual School (flvs.net) teaches hundreds of fully accredited online courses. Like charters, FLVS' per-pupil costs are a fraction of its conventional counterpart. Unlike any other school, FLVS is compensated by the state only upon students' successful completion of coursework.
- Florida offers a time-saving, 18-credit diploma program, with vocational and academic tracks. Requiring six fewer credits than a standard high-school diploma, students are motivated to graduate in three years and get on with life at college or in the workplace.

Schools need to be open to these and other outside-the-box options; they need to promote them and even partner with them where appropriate. That means guidance counselors must work in the interest of students, not the bureaucracy's. And it requires parents to educate themselves about the best available choices for their children.

As dropout rates show, the old K-12 model, like a classic monopoly, is proving increasingly inefficient. As such, it's becoming irrelevant to its supposed clientele — the students.

“Americans live in a menu-driven society where options are available in practically every aspect of life,” observes a new education report by Florida TaxWatch. The stale menu being served up by many traditional high schools needs work, and a fresh dollop of competition.