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SPENCER: Uneducating students

Diana Davis Spencer

OP-ED:

This September, summer vacation will turn into a permanent break from school for more than a million students. In fact, research shows that around 7,000 students drop out every school day, and that only about half of all students in the nation's 50 largest cities graduate from high school each year.

It is an expensive proposition with profound economic, social and fiscal consequences for both dropouts and taxpayers. If an educated workforce is the engine that will drive the state and national economy, we must create programs and policies to address this crisis.

Dropouts face an unforgiving labor market. According to a 2004 report by the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, high-school dropouts are less likely to be in the labor force, and more likely to have higher rates of unemployment. The Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE) reports that over the course of his or her lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about \$260,000 less than a high-school graduate.

The cost actually extends far beyond the dropouts themselves. Dropouts from the class of 2007 alone will cost the nation nearly \$329 billion in lost wages, taxes, and productivity over their lifetimes. AEE also notes that if dropouts from the Class of 2006 had graduated, the nation could have saved more than \$17 billion in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured health care, over the course of those young people's lifetimes. If U.S. high schools and colleges raise the graduation rates of Hispanic, African American, and Native American students to the levels of white students by 2020, the potential increase in personal income would add more than \$310 billion to the U.S. economy.

By any calculation, the steadily escalating impact of the dropout crisis requires immediate countermeasures and new ways of thinking about high-school education. Research indicates that lack of engagement serves as a prominent barrier to graduation and that both academic and social engagement are integral components of successfully navigating the education pipeline.

The Gates Foundation reports that the leading cause for dropping out is feeling unchallenged, unmotivated, bored, and unsupported. Eighty-one percent of students said that there should be more opportunities for real-world learning. Creating programs that allow students to see the connection between school and career could help stem this rising tide of dropouts. Entrepreneurship education is one way to establish that connection. Exceptional programs currently exist that can be emulated and scaled up. The Youth Entrepreneur Strategy Group (YESG) - a group of national leaders in education, entrepreneurship, business,

media, philanthropy and public policy - is working to create a strategy to advance entrepreneurship education in low-income middle and high schools. The Aspen Institute, E-Trade, and the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) are at the forefront of these initiatives.

A leader for 20 years in its field, NFTE provides inner-city students with hands-on training in how to launch their own businesses. Through the process, students begin to see the relevance of learning math and reading as real-life essentials. According to Harvard University research, NFTE students "develop a strong belief that attaining goals is within one's own control." One NFTE student sums it up: "My dream is not to die in poverty, but to have poverty die in me." More can be done. Corporations and colleges can launch mentoring programs to show students the connection between the classroom and careers. Stipends and tax credits should be used to encourage retirees to become mentors.

America cannot expect to compete in a global economy when 30 to 50 percent of our students do not graduate. Increasing the high school graduation and college matriculation rates of male students in the United States by just 5 percent could lead to combined savings and revenue of almost \$8 billion each year, by reducing crime-related costs, according to AEE. Policy-makers need to put entrepreneurship education at the forefront of their agendas.

Diana Davis Spencer is President of the Kathryn W. Davis Foundation.