Failing to Achieve: An Opinion

In 1970, it was estimated that $237 billion dollars in lifetime income was lost due to the failure of males to graduate from high school. In addition, $71 billion dollars of government income was also lost. (p.3) The stated estimates were in the dollar values of the 1070’s. Today, in the terms of current dollar values, that figure has sky rocketed. It is currently believed that one third of the students in the United States do not graduate on time. Belfield and Levin (2007) believe that, by focusing revenue on those students, the nation as a whole will reap huge benefits. They point out that this is more than just an incentive- benefits proposition. Such an investment could lead to less welfare, better health, more employment, and less crime. (Belfield & Levin, 2007, p. 16). Bob Wise (2008) of the Alliance for Excellent Education stated,

The nation’s staggering dropout rates have tangible social and economic consequences that directly affect every American. The costs are enormous, taking the form of lost taxes, greater strain on social services, increased prison rates and lost productivity. A recent study concluded that simply cutting the dropout rate in half would create $45 billion for the federal government in cost savings or increased tax revenues. Every American is affected by our failure to equip all high school students with the skills to succeed in life. (Wise, 2008)

As in the past, there is a great disparity between student achievement data based on gender and race. While the differences of ethnicity exhibit the greatest disparity in the area of academic achievement, gaps for well-being, health, and purposeful use of non-school time, are much closed. Rothstein and Wilder (2007) attribute these disparities to the continued differences in the socioeconomic classes within the United States. They found that, in spite of these inequities, the differential gaps across the spectrum have actually decreased over the last decade. The fact remains, however, many students still fail to either complete a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) or complete and receive a high school diploma. (Rothstein & Wilder, 2007, p. 45)

It is in the interest of social justice and fairness that we must investigate the reasons that one third of the students in the United States fail to complete the requirements for high school graduation. In researching the literature on this timely subject, I was surprised to find little in the way of media coverage of this topic. What was found simply repeated the same issues over and over. The greatest reason offered by the media was social issues such as poorly educated parents, inability to read and comprehend material, uninteresting courses, and an uncaring teaching force. In discussing this issue with 60 high school juniors and seniors, they seemed to feel that the greatest reason for this educational failure was despair. They felt that the majority of students in the urban environment lacked motivation to achieve in the academic arena because they did not see a lasting purpose. Students in the urban educational setting apparently believe that no one cares; not their parents, teachers, or cohorts.

As educators, we should find this revelation to be most disheartening. If teachers are failing students because they do not care whether the students” get it” then why are they even in the classroom. While the student view may be part of the picture, I do not believe that it is the entire cause. The failure to graduate is a complex problem that is school district specific- what works in Dallas might not work in Peoria. Yes, socioeconomic differences are part of the issue but so are differences in graduation requirements, gang influences, curricular focuses, and funding. There are no quick fixes to this issue, and you cannot just throw money at this problem. Bob Wise (2008) states that

Increased and well-targeted investment in secondary education will result in a revitalized and more effective system that ensures that all schools have a personalized learning environment, rigorous curriculum, community collaboration and effective leadership. (Wise, 2008)

At the current time, I am involved in conducting a focus group that includes a selected group of teachers. Our task is to brainstorm methods of increasing the district graduation rate. Missing from this focus group are the other stakeholders in this problem, namely the students, parents, and other potential stakeholders. The outcomes of these meetings remain to be seen, however, at least one student idea has already been well received and will be implemented at the beginning of the fall of 2009 school year.

Based on the input of a senior who was in danger of not graduating, a video will be shown to the rising ninth grade class. This video will address one aspect of student failure to graduate. Students will be interviewed by student reporters and share their experiences as to how and why they got into jeopardy of not graduating. All of the participants are volunteers and the first student to be interviewed will be the one who suggested this project. Will this project work? That is any one’s guess. However, if it helps even one student to reach their goal of graduating then it was worth the effort.

Rebell (2007) stated that “ An immediate action agenda must bridge the current divide between education research and policy focused on school-based improvement…” (Rebell, 2007, p. 262). Rebell continues by calling for a new commitment to comprehensive educational equity for all children. He believes that this is the true nature and driving principle behind our society. Without an excellent educational system run by those who place a high value on lifelong learning and student achievement, this experiment in democracy known as the United States of America will slip into mediocrity and anarchy. We are the third largest nation in the world and are currently the leader of the free world. If we are to retain that status, we need to reclaim our educational excellence and focus our attention on the completion of secondary education as the minimum acceptable accomplishment for our youth.

# References

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