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by Sheila Simmons

Pennsylvania Gov. Edward Rendell supports an initiative that would assign individual identifying codes to students in the ninth grade, as a way to eliminate the “invisibility” of school dropouts and to count their numbers.

Pennsylvania State Rep. James Roebuck, chair of the state House’s education committee, this year introduced legislation that would require schools to conduct exit interviews with students who withdraw from school.

Meanwhile Pennsylvania Speaker of the House of Representatives John Perzel, in a written response to the *Notebook*, suggested “a comprehensive statewide plan to identify what more can be done to increase the number of students graduating from our schools.”

The issue of youth leaving school (the theme of the [Fall 2005 edition](#) of the *Notebook*) has gained new notice from various branches of government – and for a variety of reasons.

Initiatives to keep students in high school have been spurred recently by such entities as the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#) and the [National Governors Association](#). With these has come the realization that efforts to improve secondary education are hampered by an inability to estimate the size of the dropout problem.

Dropout definitions vary widely, and many states and school systems fail to collect accurate, comprehensive data on school dropouts. That shortcoming has been highlighted as states gather data to meet No Child Left Behind’s myriad data requirements.

Pennsylvania reports a count of Philadelphia dropouts in 2003-2004 as about 5,000. But it is widely believed that that count omits hundreds, if not thousands of out-of-school youth.

“It’s a huge problem, no doubt about it,” a spokesperson for Governor Rendell’s policy office admitted. “I think it’s probably fair to say that we’ve all failed a lot of these kids.”

Collective, multiple approaches

Shelly Yanoff, executive director of [Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth](#) (PCCY), says it’s only recently that she’s been excited by the action she’s seen around the issue.

PCCY is one of dozens of local organizations that have come together in the Youth

Transition Funders Group Collaborative, which is conducting a one-year strategic assessment funded by the Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, of ways to improve outcomes for out-of-school youth and other vulnerable students.

Dropouts “have not been dealt with” by government entities, Yanoff said. “In some ways, it’s been a conspiracy not to see them. Once we see them, we have to do something about them.”

The Rendell-supported initiative that would allow school systems to track individual students wherever they are in school is one of any number of proposals that could be implemented around the issue in coming years.

Another proposal, endorsed by the state Youth Council and Workforce Investment Board of the Department of Labor & Industry, would fund a “youth intermediary organization” designed to connect schools and employers through career awareness, training, and development of high-quality, specialized programs.

Rendell’s office stressed this is one of the “multiple pathways” the Governor envisions as an approach toward more directly exposing students to the benefits of education.

Roebuck on Oct. 8, in partnership with Community College of Philadelphia, at its West Philadelphia campus, is hosting a workshop for middle-school students and parents on “How to Survive High School.”

“I think part of problem is kids aren’t academically prepared when they enter high school,” Roebuck offered. “They need information on how you make decisions about careers, how to make the right choices and what courses to take to get where you want to go.”

Perzel noted, “Not all factors related to dropout reduction can be controlled within the school setting,” or by schools alone. He suggested three key steps:

- Continue implementing programs to identify students at-risk of dropping out and provide more individualized education services for them;
- Identify exemplary dropout prevention programs and encourage their duplication in Pennsylvania school districts with high dropout rates; and
- Encourage partnerships "between schools, teachers, administrators, parents and parent groups, community-based providers, businessleaders, and local governments" to develop coordinated plans for dealing with the many facets of the issue.

“As a society, we cannot afford the human and economic costs related to students dropping out of school,” Perzel stated. “When a single student drops out after being enrolled in a Pennsylvania public school for 10 years, taxpayers lose an estimated \$93,670 investment. And this staggering figure does not even include the long-term costs related to the lost potential of those who never graduate.”

Roebuck’s bill, introduced to the Pennsylvania House education committee in June, requires school superintendents to order reports from each school district on the

whereabouts of and motivating factors for school dropouts. The interviews would be required for students absent and unexcused for more than three days. Parents would have to complete interviews of students who cannot be located or face a penalty of \$50, funds that would go toward locating the student.

The bill drew a number of co-sponsors, including local representatives Harold James, Babette Josephs, Marie Lederer, Curtis Thomas, Ronald G .Waters and Rosita Youngblood.

Meanwhile, the state has already put into place some efforts aimed at preventing students from dropping out of school. They include Project 720 – named for the number of days in a typical high school career from ninth grade to 12th-grade graduation. Individual high schools may receive grant funds, but they must show proof of dropout re-entry, and research-based, dropout prevention strategies.

Two schools in Philadelphia – Carver and Lamberton – are receiving Project 720 grants.

In his comments, Perzel also pointed to \$15 million in state funding for alternative school programs and to the establishment of the School District of Philadelphia's RETI-WRAP pilot program, which provides a transitional step for students who have been adjudicated or incarcerated.

Local leadership

Among city government officials, the approach toward addressing the dropout rate focuses around message-building, supporting service-organization collaborations targeting youth behavior, and encouraging local employers and developers to support parent involvement and assist schools in making education more relevant to future employment opportunities.

“It’s time to come together collectively, to sit down at the table and grapple with what kids are saying is viable,” said Jacqueline Barnett, Mayor Street’s newly appointed Secretary of Education.

Councilman Michael Nutter, a candidate for mayor, noted that he has encouraged employers to allow flexible schedules for parents wanting to support their school-age children by participating in activities during the school day. He has also introduced legislation that would require employers and developers seeking certain tax breaks for projects to provide work opportunities to school-age youth in Philadelphia.

“From the business and government standpoint, we have to make it more evident to young people that there are benefits to staying in school,” he said.

And City Controller Jonathan Sidel, also a potential candidate for Philadelphia mayor, spoke passionately in an interview on the dropout problem. He argued the existence of a “direct correlation between education and economic development, not to mention a moral obligation.”

“People in the generation before made sure we were educated,” he said. “So we owe other generations the same thing.”

Saidel cited specialty schools around job skills as an approach he favored.

Youth advocates indeed say they are looking for a mayoral candidate who will take leadership on the issue.

PCCY's Yanoff noted plenty of opportunity exists for political leaders and others to develop new strategies.

"There is some alternative programming being done," she said. "But there should be a whole host of alternatives inside and outside of the current school system. There should be a network of programs supporting these kids in getting the kind of education that allows them to be able to earn a living and face life."

"All of us have a job to do," she said.

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