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Shedding some light on dropout rates

By Roy Dixon, Emmett Farrell and Wilbert S. Miller

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This week, the California Department of Education released high school dropout figures for every school and district in the state. For the first time, parents and students, teachers and state officials have access to accurate information about what has been dubbed the “silent epidemic” plaguing many of our schools and communities. And while the picture these “real” numbers paint are disturbing, this new information should be welcomed by every person in California who cares about the state’s students and future.

That’s right, welcomed, not for the disappointing picture the numbers paint, but for the opportunity they represent.

The release of accurate dropout statistics brings an opportunity to engage in an honest dialogue about what’s working and what’s not in our schools and for our students. This is an opportunity for everyone – city and county governments, business and community groups, parents and students, clergy and law enforcement – to commit to working with schools and districts to create pathways to graduation for all students. And it is an opportunity to understand how investing in accurate and accessible educational data is a necessary prerequisite for improving all students’ performance outcomes.

Every year, California school districts have reported estimated dropout statistics for their schools. Every year, those numbers have been lower – often significantly lower – than the dropout statistics reported by outside experts. The result has been confusion, frustration and finger-pointing as communities try to make sense of the conflicting numbers.

Six years ago, the Legislature passed SB 1453, which created the Statewide Student Identifier, creating a tracking system that allows districts and the state Department of Education to keep track of every public school student in the state and enabling yesterday’s release of much more accurate statewide dropout statistics.

While these new numbers will understandably be met with sadness, frustration and even anger, they must also lead to positive action. The San Diego Organizing Project and its sister PICO California Network of Community Organizations affiliates throughout the state are taking up this challenge. We’re advocating for collaboration around programs and practices that not only keep students in school, but also enable them to thrive.

The San Diego Organizing Project is a multi-issue, multi-faith, grass-roots community organization representing 43,000 families in 26 congregations in San Diego, La Mesa, El Cajon, National City and Chula Vista. SDOP is affiliated with PICO California, a faith-based community organizing network representing 450,000 families throughout the state.

As people of faith, we believe we have an individual and collective responsibility to “own” the dropout crisis. Everyone suffers when a student drops out of school. A young person loses hope and opportunities. Neighborhoods and cities are less safe. Businesses lack skilled workers. Our communities – and our collective future – are diminished. Now is not the time to cut budgets or disinvest in schools and youth. Now is the time to recommit ourselves to doing whatever it takes to support all students.

For more than 18 months, clergy and community leaders have been in dialogue with city, county and school district officials, all of whom realize that the dropout rate is one symptom of a larger community issue. Out of these conversations, our organizations’ families understand that we must make our youth our highest priority. In addition to an increased focus on educational performance, our youth need innovative engagement opportunities such as after-school, recreational and job-training programs, and strong safety net initiatives including juvenile

crime diversion programs.

That's why in the coming weeks and months, the San Diego Organizing Project and PICO Network community organizations throughout California will use this new dropout information as a catalyst for continued community-wide conversations about the challenges facing our youth and our schools. We have declared 2008 to be the "Year of Our Youth," an opportunity for all of us to work together. We can create a new shared vision and a thoughtful plan to provide opportunities and support all youths' need to lead a full and productive life.

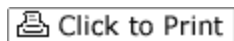
Given what's at stake – for our students, our communities, and our democracy – there's no more important work to be done.

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