

Education plan must extend to dropouts

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Last year, 4,306 students dropped out of the Cleveland schools. The year before, 4,278 did. Only about a third of the students graduate.

Why bother reciting these depressing statistics? Everybody knows that the Cleveland schools have serious problems. Cutting the dropout rate depends on improving the school system, a job that the district is tackling aggressively.

But as important as that is, it doesn't answer the other side of this unfortunate reality. There are tens of thousands of young adults in Cleveland who dropped out of school without getting diplomas, and for many, their prospects of earning a decent income are bleak. That spells trouble for them, and in turn, for the larger community. The city's mayoral candidates need to address this diploma deficit. Over the last four years alone, 17,961 students left Cleveland schools without diplomas. More than half of them - some 9,218 students - didn't finish the ninth grade.

Tens of thousands more didn't complete high school in the previous decade. Some students, it's true, later earned their diplomas by going back and taking the high school equivalency test. But they represent only a fraction of the total. Last year, about 1,300 people took the test in the city, and about 800 passed.

That leaves many with a grim economic future. Between 1979 and 1999, median wages for Ohioans who didn't have high school diplomas fell by 32.7 percent, after adjusting for inflation. According to an analysis of census data by Policy Matters Ohio, they earned a median wage of \$7.80 an hour, compared to \$10.68 for high school graduates and \$17.31 for college graduates. Even high school graduates saw real incomes fall, but by nowhere near as much as their less- educated counterparts.

For most families, it's hard to make ends meet on such low pay. The Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., recently produced family budgets based on analyzing what it would cost for working families with young children to maintain a safe and decent standard of living. It found that when the head of the household has less than a high school education, more than two-thirds of those families fell below such budget levels.

These adults are the mothers and fathers of many of the students enrolled in the Cleveland schools. A recent analysis by The Plain Dealer of Northeast Ohio proficiency test scores found that the proportion of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches was "an almost certain predictor of test success" ("Poverty takes a toll on school test scores," June 17). It will be hard for many students to succeed, even in a much-improved school system, when their family income is so low. Of course, not every one of the many who have dropped out of the school system has stayed in the city. But the tens of thousands of adults who never finished high school represent a significant fraction of the city's labor force, which numbers just over 200,000.

It should be no surprise that Cleveland residents lost ground even during the longest boom in U.S. history. The average taxpayer in the Cleveland school district earned \$25,844 in 1998, according to the Council for Economic Opportunities in Greater Cleveland. That was down 2.7 percent from 1989 after adjustment for inflation. For the average Ohioan, earnings rose 9.1 percent over the same period.

There are a variety of local adult education programs, including a number operated by the Cleveland School District. However, the city clearly needs far more than it has now.

The mayor of Cleveland is responsible for economic development and for the school system. As Bill Callahan, director of the West Side Community Computer Center, notes, "This is the single most important place where those two things overlap." The challenge of schooling Cleveland's undereducated adults may not have the sex appeal of a new convention center or biotechnology park, but if the city is to have a bright economic future, it's an issue that the new mayor will have to confront.

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