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L.A. Learning to Curb High School Dropouts

By **ROBERT BALFANZ** and **ELISE BUIK**

L.A. employers take note: New California Education Department data show that 94,000 students in the class of 2010 dropped out of high school. Of them, 11,000 were from Los Angeles. Perhaps most disturbing is that the state was able to estimate that 17,000 additional students dropped out before they even got to high school. These numbers should serve as an alarm bell for L.A. companies, especially as recent studies warn that many California employers soon may be unable to find enough skilled workers to remain competitive.

If there's any good news, it's that we finally have the information needed to end the dropout crisis, thanks to the decade-long quest to get accurate measures of high school graduation rates combined with recent advances in developing early warning indicators for dropping out.

We now know exactly which high schools produce the majority of dropouts. We even know which students in those high schools and their feeder middle schools are signaling that they need help. This knowledge means we can mobilize resources where they are most needed while there is still time to do something about it.

And Los Angeles is positioned to be at the forefront of this effort. Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent John Deasy's efforts to turn secondary schools into pipelines to postsecondary success, combined with the power of local non-profits, foundations and corporations, have the potential to transform the lives of 10,000 students a year, and 100,000 over a decade. The United Way of Greater Los Angeles, for example, is at the cutting edge of a national United Way effort to cut the dropout rate in half by 2018.

LAUSD and the local United Way recently partnered with

Diplomas Now, a proven approach that helps the toughest middle and high schools in America's largest cities ensure that students graduate ready for college or careers.

Principal Joanne Carrillo at John H. Liechty Middle School calls it a "magic bullet" that has contributed to turning around her school near downtown Los Angeles. Carrillo credits Diplomas Now with helping to boost test scores and student attendance, quell fights and suspensions, and engage hundreds of low-income parents. The secret, she said, is that Diplomas Now "makes the kids feel like everyday heroes. It makes them feel they matter."

Warning signs

Our research shows that a sixth-grader with even one of the following warning signs is 75 percent more likely to drop out of high school than his peers: poor attendance, failure in English or math, and poor behavior. Diplomas Now identifies such students early and works with the school to eliminate their problems.

Diplomas Now unites three national non-profits: Johns Hopkins University's Talent Development Secondary, a school reform model that improves instruction and performance; City Year's young-adult "near peers" who welcome students, call them if they don't show up, provide tutoring, reward positive behavior, and involve students in service and enrichment programs; and Communities in Schools' case managers who help the neediest students access community resources, such as counseling, health care, housing, food and clothing.

This is the third year Diplomas Now has operated at Liechty and Hollenbeck Middle School and its first year at William Jefferson Clinton Middle School in South Los Angeles. Last year, Diplomas Now won a major grant from the U.S. Department of Education to expand to more schools. And the United Way of

Greater Los Angeles recently launched a campaign to bring the model to even more local schools.

That's Principal Carrillo's wish: "If every school could have this, we would see a huge change." She sees change schoolwide and in individual kids, such as sixth-grader Chris. Teachers and the Diplomas Now team met to determine why Chris was acting out at school and learned his father recently had been deported. His mom was struggling. The team made sure Chris understood people cared about him, set expectations, and got him into counseling and a program to prevent kids from joining gangs. Chris used this direction to get back on track.

Gaudencio Marquez from Communities in Schools and Blake Gilliam from City Year are among those who keep kids from falling through the cracks. Last year, Gilliam, 23, tutored a dozen struggling English-as-a-Second-Language students, making her own flashcards, and working with kids before, during and after school. Marquez organized a reception for parents and students with the greatest challenges, the first time most of the kids had ever been honored. Today, at Liechty, "kids rush to get to their classrooms on time," said Marquez. "They want to be there."

The dropout crisis will not end without community involvement. Local businesses should join the movement to spread success to schools with great challenges. The alternative is adding thousands more young adults without futures to local unemployment rolls every year.

Robert Balfanz is a senior research scientist at Johns Hopkins University, where he is co-director of Talent Secondary and co-director of the Everyone Graduates Center. Elise Buik is president and chief executive of the United Way of Greater Los Angeles.