School district will use funds to learn why some students don't graduate

By Paul Read
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Three community organizations have agreed to fund a study that’s thought to be a key piece in determining what student risk factors affect the high-school dropout rate here.

The three, United Way of Spokane County, Inland Northwest Community Foundation, and Empire Health Foundation say they’ll provide the anticipated $35,000 to $45,000 needed for what’s being called a longitudinal study of students at risk of dropping out of school, says Mark Hurtubise, president and CEO of the Inland Northwest Community Foundation.

Hurtubise also is involved, along with leaders of the other two funding organizations, in a group called Priority Spokane, which seeks improvement in various community issues, including the dropout rate. That group spearheaded a report conducted by Gonzaga University that suggested strategies for improving graduation rates.

Among those strategies was development of an early warning system that could identify middle-school students who aren’t likely to graduate from high school for whatever reason. In order to develop such an early warning system, the Gonzaga report recommended a so-called longitudinal study of dropouts be conducted for Spokane Public Schools. The idea of a longitudinal study is to track students as they move through the school system, although the study will look backward, at students who have dropped out, in order to get the data faster.

“The temptation is that why a student drops out is anecdotal,” says Hurtubise. “We have to be careful that we don’t generalize about certain factors,” such as socioeconomic and demographic.

“There may be risk factors that take place outside the classroom that impact what’s going on in the classroom,” he says. “We want to identify the risk factors that are unique to our community.”

The grant money the three organizations will provide for the longitudinal study will go to Spokane Public Schools, which plans soon to hire a consultant to conduct the study. Hurtubise says the project will start as soon as possible, and it’s hoped it will be completed by next spring.

North Central High School Principal Steven Gehring, who is working on the project for the district, says the consultant will look at real kids in Spokane and ask when they started to fall behind, and what the hurdles are in Spokane to graduation.

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Mark Hurtubise
Inland Northwest Community Foundation

“We are absences, mobility, or a certain class, for example?” asks Gehring. “Or are they mental illness and trauma?”

He says that once that information is collected, the district will monitor kids who face such hurdles and try to eliminate or minimize the hurdles.

“The cost of building an accurate early warning system is relatively small compared with the cost of providing programmatic interventions or systemwide reforms meant to increase graduation rates,” Gehring says. “But the payoff of basing interventions on accurate data can be huge.”

Gehring says an ongoing study in Philadelphia has shown that the schools there can now identify half of all likely eventual high-school dropouts as early as sixth grade.

Civic organizations and the school district have estimated that the dropout rate in Spokane County is about 29 percent, and have pointed to statistics indicating that the societal and economic costs of having students drop out of school are high. The Inland Northwest Community Foundation and the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation paid for the $43,000 study by Gonzaga, and Hurtubise says those and other funders likely will be willing to provide more money to attack the problem.

Meanwhile, a separate group has proposed a property tax levy here, titled Proposition 1, which would raise about $30 million over six years by levying a tax of 35 cents per $1,000 of property valuation within the city of Spokane. That measure, which is on the Nov. 2 ballot, would provide grants to community organizations with the intention of getting more students here to graduate from high school.

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