Dropout solutions under study

Foundation grants pay for Gonzaga researchers to find successful programs

By Richard Ripley
Of the Journal of Business

Gonzaga University’s School of Education is conducting a study of efforts employed nationally and internationally to reduce high school dropout rates.

The Spokane-based Inland Northwest Community Foundation and the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation are paying for the $43,000 study, which was sparked by concerns here about the dropout rate in Spokane Public Schools’ six high schools, says Mark Hurtubise, president and CEO of the Spokane foundation. That rate has been calculated at 29.3 percent for the class of 2008 and 28.7 percent for the class of 2009, Spokane Public Schools says.

“I believe we’re going to create a model that in three to five years will lead to a higher graduation rate,” says Hurtubise.

The study was launched after task forces set up by Priority Spokane, a civic betterment organization, ranked educational attainment No. 1 among community issues that it believed needed to be addressed, Hurtubise says. Priority Spokane’s steering committee includes two mayors, two city council members, a county commissioner, a university president, nonprofit and health district leaders, and others.

The study will center on improving students’ experiences in middle schools, which feed students into high schools, Hurtubise says.

“We’re looking for successful interventions at the national and international level, models that have the potential to be implemented locally and to increase the graduation rate,” he says.

Gonzaga’s team, including Jon Sunderland, dean of the School of Education, and others, planned to visit middle schools in Seattle and Portland and also to investigate ideas employed in other cities, Hurtubise says.

Findings from the first half of the research team's work will be presented May 6 in a meeting to which community leaders will be invited, Hurtubise says. The rest of the research findings will be presented at a summer meeting, to which nonprofit organizations will be invited. Then, in the fall, a public meeting will be held on the final study results.

Separately, a group of nearly 40 organizations has launched a petition drive to ask voters here to approve this fall a six-year property-tax levy that would raise $5 million annually to fund a Children’s Investment Fund to pay for efforts to lower the high school dropout rate.

“Separately, a group of nearly 40 organizations has launched a petition drive to ask voters here to approve this fall a six-year property-tax levy that would raise $5 million annually to fund a Children’s Investment Fund to pay for efforts to lower the high school dropout rate, “ says Hurtubise.

Asked about the Gonzaga study, Ben Stuckart, executive director of the business-backed group Communities in Schools in Spokane and a member of the steering committee behind the Children’s Investment Fund petition drive, says, “What we hope is that this will give us good data to fund programs that work once the Investment Fund passes.”

Still, Stuckart says, the Gonzaga study is somewhat limited because of its focus only on middle school.

“We see the need for not just middle school intervention,” he says. “Early childhood learning has been shown to be a very successful intervention, too. It’s a whole continuum, that we, as a community, need to have of intervention at every level.”

Studies have shown that blanketing a population of students with the right kind of early childhood learning can decrease by one-fifth the high school dropout rate of those students later, and that certain mentoring programs can produce a similar result, Stuckart says.

Earlier this week, Stuckart said the petition drive had come up short of its goal of collecting 12,000 signatures in time to put the Children’s Investment Fund levy on the Aug. 17 primary election ballot. He said the group planned to continue its efforts to qualify the levy for the Nov. 2 general election ballot.

Hurtubise says that the entire community—the schools, teachers, parents, and others—is responsible for the high school dropout rate, “but who’s accountable?”

“We have to improve. We have to change,” and finger-pointing will do no good, Hurtubise says.

Sunderland says the research results that will be presented May 6 will report on programs that have been deemed to be both successful and unsuccessful, plus the demographics of the students involved and other factors.

The researchers, however, will not yet have talked with people who provide those programs, he says, adding that will come later.

“We’re looking at everything right now,” Sunderland says. “Boston has created a very large intervention program, and Chicago has launched some programs, he says.

The researchers will talk with those behind such programs, including in Spokane, later, he says.

Spokane Public Schools says it supports the study. Hurtubise says that other school districts here have said they would like to be involved in such research efforts.

Hurtubise says the study will include researching the theory behind successful dropout-prevention programs, the models devised to implement the programs, strategies that should be employed to launch such efforts here, the parties that could make the programs successful, and “absolute measurement” to see whether programs work.

“We want a business model,” or a plan that could be put into use, rather than a theoretical statement, he says. “We want to hit a home run.”

The Gates Foundation is following the research work closely, he says.

Contact Richard Ripley at (509) 344-1261 or via e-mail at editor@spokanejournal.com.