Steps begin here to cut dropout rate

Every new year should herald restored optimism for ourselves and our community. It is because of this spirit of hope that Priority Spokane was formalized last month by the signing of a charter focused on establishing a new civic model of cooperation.

Comprised of community leaders, Priority Spokane believes that only through collaborative and focused efforts on community priorities can there be sustained improvements to economic vitality, education, the environment, health, and safety so that all who live and work here will flourish.

As a first step, Priority Spokane, along with more than 120 volunteers, Spokane Public Schools, and Eastern Washington University’s Institute for Public Policy and Economic Analysis identified educational attainment—specifically, increasing high-school graduation rates here—as an immediate priority.

This was determined, in part, because of a state report that indicated in 2009 the on-time, four-year high school graduation rate for Spokane high schools was about 60 percent.

National studies confirm that by graduating more high-school students, a community can achieve economic vitality, healthier citizens, and a safer environment. Priority Spokane believes this can be done by enhancing middle-school students’ experience in and outside the classroom.

To begin this process, in early 2010, Priority Spokane awarded a grant, funded by the Inland Northwest Community Foundation (INWCF) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to Gonzaga University, to identify strategies that positively affect the middle-school experience.

Gonzaga’s report recommended three major strategies to accomplish this goal: a dropout early-warning system, high academic expectations and achievement, and social support for students.

As a first step to building an improved dropout early-warning system, Spokane Public Schools, with the assistance of Priority Spokane, secured funding from Spokane County United Way, Empire Health Foundation, and INWCF for a six-month historical longitudinal study. The study will identify the risk factors that significantly contributed to students dropping out of school here in 2008 and 2010.

These risk factors then will be used to track enrolled students with a newly designed, advanced dropout early-warning system. The school district, community organizations, and families will be able to use this information to determine more accurately when, where, and how to assist students in staying on track to high-school graduation.

Another strategy is to improve student support in and outside the classroom. Gonzaga identified numerous agencies, schools, and community-based organizations that provide services to middle-level students.

Priority Spokane is interested in learning from these organizations about their experiences with student success, their capacity to expand their effectiveness, and what other risk factors they perceive contribute to drop-out rates.

There is overwhelming consensus that student involvement in extracurricular activities and positive family engagement contribute to their success. We want to identify the Spokane programs that successfully encourage family engagement in a child’s learning experience or facilitate student involvement in extracurricular activities. Also, are there gaps in student services outside the classroom that can be discovered and rectified?

This research will begin soon with a Priority Spokane grant co-funded by the Harriet Cheney Cowles Foundation, Empire Health Foundation, and INWCF.

Spokane Public Schools are our schools. These students are our children. Priority Spokane is optimistic that as this research becomes available, we can partner both inside and outside the classroom so every student can visualize and achieve success. Our future as a vital community depends upon it!

Mark Hurtubise is a member of Priority Spokane and president of Inland Northwest Community Foundation.