left behind: A star editorial board series

About the series
Sunday: Indiana claims 90 percent of students graduate from high school. The real numbers should shock you.

Monday: Indianapolis Public Schools operates some of the worst dropout factories in the nation.

Tuesday: Graduation rates are low in several suburban Marion County school districts.

Wednesday: In Indianapolis, and across the nation, more black males are dropping out of high school than graduating.

Thursday: IPS hopes to turn around its failing high schools by adopting a small schools strategy. But the achievement gap begins to develop early, and by the time students are in high school many believe they can never catch up.

Friday: More than 20,000 students who drop out every year in Indiana are an economic drain on the state and its cities.

Saturday: Educators say the challenge of turning dropout factories into centers of excellence falls heavily on teachers.

Sunday: Community leaders must engage in honest discussion about how to remedy the dropout epidemic.

Why you should care
About three out of 10 students in Indiana quit high school before graduating. Many become an enormous drain on taxpayers because they land in prison or require extensive social services. The dropout rate also hinders economic growth. Employers increasingly demand a well-educated work force. But Indiana is 46th in the nation in the education attainment level of the population. The high dropout rate means a loss of human capital that makes Indiana far less economically competitive.

Let's talk
State and local educators as well as community activists and students will discuss answers to those questions and others during a community town hall at 7 p.m. May 24 in the auditorium at Ben Davis High School, 1200 N. Girls School Road. To register call 444-6170.
Missing in action

Indiana claims 90 percent of students graduate from high school. The real numbers should shock you.
May 15, 2005

Jarrell Garrett watched five older siblings quit school. He saw his brothers go to prison. He’s witnessed children in his neighborhood make easy money selling crack cocaine and "wets" -- marijuana cigarettes soaked in embalming fluid.

Jarrell, a 14-year-old sixth-grader at Indianapolis Public Schools’ Pacers Academy, says he is determined to become the first child in his family to graduate from high school.

The odds are against him.

The state Department of Education, in documents sent to the federal government and its communication with the public, claims 90 percent of students in Indiana graduate from high school. IPS, the state’s largest district, also touts a 90 percent graduation figure in records it sends to the state.

Reality is far more dismal.

An analysis by The Indianapolis Star Editorial Board shows that nearly two-thirds of students in IPS do not graduate from high school on time. The completion rate for the IPS class of 2004 was only 35 percent.

About three of every 10 students drop out of Indiana high schools. According to a Manhattan Institute study, Indiana's graduation rate ranks 30th in the nation. Graduation rates in some suburban Marion County school districts also are unacceptably low. In Decatur Township schools, only 53 percent of eighth-graders in the class of 2004 graduated on time, according to numbers obtained from the state Department of Education.

State and local educators' failure to report realistic graduation rates has obscured the extent of the dropout epidemic in Indiana. Every year, more than 20,000 students quit high school before earning a diploma. They are, in all likelihood, condemning themselves to lives of poverty, drifting from one dead-end job to another. Many will land in prison or in homeless shelters.

Students in Indiana are moving in opposite directions. More students are taking Advanced Placement classes, and standardized test scores are slowly rising. Yet, according to the Manhattan Institute study, Indiana’s graduation rate declined from 76 percent in 1991 to 72 percent in 2002.

"We have more students in Indiana going to college," says Stan Jones, the state commissioner of higher education. "We also have more students dropping out."

On the state and national levels, the problem falls disproportionately on black males. A 2004 study by the Schott Foundation for Public Education found that in Indiana only 38 percent of black males in the class of 2002 graduated from high school. Indiana's graduation rate for white males was 70 percent. Nationally, the figures were 43 percent for black males and 71 percent for white males.

At The Star's request, researcher Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University analyzed graduation numbers from the IPS class of 2002. Balfanz and his team found that only 25 percent of black males graduated with their classmates. Unlike national and state figures, the number was even worse for white males in IPS -- a mere 23 percent earned diplomas in 2002.
Balfanz uncovered another startling fact. IPS, according to the Johns Hopkins research team, was the only large school district in the nation in which every high school ranked poorly in an index called "promotion power" -- the rate by which freshmen complete high school four years later.

IPS administrators point to students transferring out of the district as a prime reason for the low graduation numbers. Balfanz, however, says his team took transfers into consideration. "We looked over a number of years to see if large-scale out-migration could be behind some of this," he said. "Overall, we do note declines in enrollment, but they are happening in all grades, including eighth, which means that migration can't really be used to explain away these findings."

Why are so many students dropping out at a time when a high school diploma is merely the starting point for earning a livable income?


"I was a troubled child," Terri Coleman says bluntly. She dropped out of Pike High School in 1996, a 17-year-old senior who had earned the academic credits of a freshman. She was pregnant with her first child.

Coleman, now 26 and out of work, recently enrolled in Ivy Tech State College's GED program. She went back to school because of a question she couldn't answer. "My 7-year-old son came home from school and asked me, 'What's an adjective?' " Coleman says. "I knew I needed to learn more to help him. I've been doing well in class. I thought I was stupid, but I guess I'm not."

The first step in persuading more young people like Coleman to complete high school is for educators finally to acknowledge the extent of the dropout problem.

Inflated graduation numbers have lulled the public into believing that dropping out is rare. It's not. And thousands of young people are suffering the consequences.

Anita Silverman / Principal, IPS Pacers Academy
May 15, 2005

Almost 20 years ago, I graduated from high school. Yes, you can guess about how old I am, but do you really know? Most people assume that high school graduates are 18 years old, unless, of course, they just made the cutoff date for kindergarten and may be 17.

The reality is that there are many potential high school graduates who drop out simply because they are too old to be in high school. They don't want to be 19 or 20 or 21 when they graduate. It's a shame, too. These are future teachers, accountants, hotel managers and the like, but they drop out because they're too old.

I wish I could get the message out that nobody will ask you how old you were when you graduated from high school. The question will be, "What year did you graduate from high school?" or, "Did you graduate?," but never about age. We need to focus on youth graduating, period. If our youth fall into the young adult age, it is still our responsibility to see them graduate. It is a disgrace the amount of youth we allow to become dropouts and often the latest population on welfare and in prison.

It is easy to learn why kids drop out of school. All one has to do is ask a student who is at high risk of dropping out. Since I am the principal of an alternative school, a school designed to prevent dropouts, all I have to do is ask students. Their reasons are always the same. Kids drop out because they don't feel they belong, they are too old, the teachers don't care, they have home
responsibilities, they can make money elsewhere, too many rules, or they are sick of school and they have talked their parents into it.

Never have I heard that they don't want to graduate. It is a mix of a high level of frustration by youth, parents (if they are involved) tossing their hands in the air, and a school making life simpler for educators. Let's face it, the student hanging on every word a teacher says is easier to educate than one considering dropping out who needs to be pulled back into academic knowledge.

I am not naïve. I know how difficult it is to reach some of our youth. As an educator, that is my job. My job is to educate children -- all children -- not just those who want to learn. There is an old saying that says, “They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.” This is so true.

I have witnessed students who hate school begin to love it because of the teachers they see every day. The student may never become a mathematician, but he or she will become a high school graduate with the right mix of love and understanding along with consistency and emotional strength given by the educator.

Educators no longer just instill knowledge. We are also social workers, substitute parent, a bank account around lunch hour. This is our job, and we have to accept it. For those who don't, please let me help you find another place to work. Our dropout rate is far too high. With budget cuts, GED programs are being cut. If we let youth leave without a diploma, what will they do? How will they find a job to feed their children? Of course, there is always prison or welfare.

I was one of the lucky ones. Mr. Bob from North Central High School kept me encouraged when I was a high school mess. He built a relationship that encouraged me to keep going. I wanted to be a teacher like Mr. Bob.

I am now a school principal who encourages teachers to build relationships with students so they have a purpose behind school. Dropping out isn't an option. Failing is not an option. Walking across a stage with a diploma in hand is worth the time. Success doesn't have an age limit. Besides, nobody ever asked.

**Stan Jones / Indiana Commissioner for Higher Education**  
May 15, 2005

Enrollment at Indiana's college campuses is at an all-time high. Our high school seniors are going on to college at an unprecedented rate. These students are better prepared than ever before with 65 percent of high school grads completing Indiana's Core 40 curriculum. It is clear to many Hoosier families that the path to economic and social prosperity is college.

However, for a substantial number of young people, this prosperity will be a distant and bitter dream.

Each year, more than 20,000 of Indiana students drop out of high school. The result: Almost 30 percent of 19-year-olds are trying to make it without a high school diploma. In the past Indiana, like other states, used a flawed formula for reporting high school graduation rates. This formula made it appear as if nearly 90 percent of Hoosiers graduate from high school. More accurate calculations show that only about 70 percent finish high school.

I hope we all find this alarming.

In some Indiana communities, more students drop out of high school and join the ranks of the unemployed and underemployed than walk across the stage at graduation. Many urban high schools have graduation rates lower than 30 percent. A specific and startling example of this
can be seen at one Central Indiana high school where only 155 of 570 students who were enrolled as ninth-graders four years prior actually graduated. The consequences for the individual student, local communities and the state are many. A high school diploma can be worth at least half a million dollars over a lifetime in earnings. High school dropouts make up more than 80 percent of state and federal prison populations. Over 30 years, one dropout can cost a community a half a million dollars in welfare, health care and incarceration costs.

Indiana is beginning to take action to change these results.


The legislation also provides more flexibility in allowing students to work and go to school through a School Flex program.

This legislation signals not the end of the discussion, but the beginning.

At the core of this important issue is our economy. How can Indiana build a strong economic engine when almost one-third of our young people attempt to enter the work force without a high school degree? Is this the economic backbone that we can depend on in a globally competitive marketplace? How will these individuals pay their share of taxes and contribute to the social infrastructure? Can we rest easy in our retirement years depending on them to support Social Security? While many will be good solid citizens, how will we support the high numbers of dropouts who end up in bankruptcy, welfare, jail, crime and homelessness?

And just who are these dropouts?

They were those bright, eager, energetic 5-year-olds so full of promise when they started kindergarten. They are the same children that over time became increasingly disconnected and disillusioned. Many were not troublemakers or necessarily poor students. When asked, these young people will tell you they did not drop out because the tests or the classes were too difficult; they dropped out because they were bored, unchallenged, did not have anyone who believed in them and did not see the connection of what they were learning in high school to their real world.

It's time for a wakeup call on this issue. The real numbers of students choosing to drop out of high school every year should greatly disturb us all. There are no simple solutions. We must learn more about what we can do and take action to engage every one of our young people in a meaningful education that leads all of them to high school graduation with the opportunity for college.

One person's story
'I wanted to graduate'
May 15, 2005

Life was a hard climb for Kelly McDermott long before she began living on her own at age 16. Now she's pregnant, due in June. She's living with her 17-year-old boyfriend, who dropped out of high school but is working to support his new family.
Kelly is determined to attend her high school graduation May 31. And she’s determined to deliver a speech as class valedictorian at the Pacers Academy, an IPS alternative school.

Kelly plans to attend Ivy Tech State College in the fall, studying for a career as an X-ray technician. She's set to become the second person from her family to graduate from high school. Her brother dropped out, and she quit once herself. Why did she come back?

"I wanted to graduate," she says quietly but with fire in her eyes.

## Dropout factories

### IPS high schools are among nation's worst in producing graduates.

May 16, 2005

Indianapolis Public Schools operates some of the worst dropout factories in the nation. Hundreds of students each year quit school, most landing in dead-end jobs or prisons. In some families, dropping out has become a way of life with neither parents nor children completing high school.

IPS claims an official graduation rate of 90 percent. District administrators, however, admit the number is lower -- shockingly lower.

IPS Board President Kelly Bentley, in a meeting with editorial writers, pegged the district's graduation rate at 28 percent. A Star Editorial Board analysis found a 35 percent completion rate for the class of 2004. National and local researchers report IPS graduation rates ranging from 28 to 47 percent, depending on the formula used.

Manual High School Principal Ken Poole admits that "what we're doing right now is not working."

It's not for lack of trying.

- Manual freshmen who didn't make it out of middle school until age 16 -- and other at-risk students -- are put under the watchful eye of Shirl Miller-Smith, who keeps tabs on their grades and attendance as the "mother hen" of the Alpha Program.
- To keep students from skipping class, they're put to work tending children in Manual's all-day kindergarten.
- Social workers scour neighborhoods to find students who haven't shown up for class. Occasionally, they pick them up and drive them to school.

Yet, on average just 125 -- 27 percent -- of the 450 freshmen who enter Manual in a typical school year progress to their senior year on time. One freshman, David Kline, who turns 16 this month, already declares, "I'll finish this year out and then that'll probably be it."

Manual's "promotion power," or ninth- to-12th grade attrition rate, is the worst in the state.

In fact, all five IPS high schools promoted less than 60 percent of their freshmen to seniors on time. IPS fares worse than school systems in New York City, Detroit and Chicago. "This is the first district I have seen where all high schools are doing this poorly," said Robert Balfanz, a Johns Hopkins University researcher who analyzed the data for The Star.

IPS Superintendent Pat Pritchett says dropping out is so prevalent that eighth-grade graduations -- the only commencement many students will ever experience -- have become major celebrations at some schools.
Yet, IPS officials also claim that many of the lost students transfer to other school districts. Balfanz, however, notes that IPS' enrollment has declined in all grades. He says migration "can't really be used to explain away these findings."

IPS' dropout crisis reflects the woes of the neighborhoods the district serves. About 81 percent of IPS students qualify for free and reduced-priced meals, a prime indicator of poverty. Manual High Guidance Director Janet Huck says 75 percent of this year's senior class worked an average of 27 hours week "to put food on the table."

The temptation to make money on the streets also pulls students from school. "You wouldn't believe how many young people are selling drugs," says Reda Stewart, a senior at the Pacers Academy, an alternative school. "It's crazy."

The seeds of failure sprout well before high school. Only 50 percent of Manual's incoming freshmen for the 2005-06 school year passed the eighth-grade ISTEP exam.

That number, although still low, is significantly better than in previous years when a mere 20 percent of incoming students passed the state's test of basic skills.

The district's high suspension and expulsion rates also contribute to students giving up on school. Two IPS middle schools -- Coleman and Longfellow -- were among the top 20 in the state in the rate of expulsions last year.

Expelled students, by IPS policy, generally are not allowed to attend alternative classes or enroll in another district. A year out of school means troubled students fall farther behind, or into more trouble.

As Joseph Matthews III, president of the Indiana Opportunities Industrialization Centers State Council, notes, in "a year . . . you can disappear. Your life can go to hell in a hand basket."

District leaders like Bentley are beginning to acknowledge the scope of the dropout epidemic. IPS' new small-schools strategy, scheduled to roll out next school year, is designed to help more students earn diplomas.

The true test of whether IPS can improve, however, will come in how the community reacts to finally hearing the facts about the high dropout rate. Outrage? Yes. Blame? Let's not waste much time there. The greater need is for Indianapolis' political, business, academic and religious leaders to rally together to begin confronting a problem that will not easily pass.

One person's story
'Everybody has their blinders on'

May 16, 2005

Toya Cosby is outraged.

The Northwest High School sophomore has seen friends drop out after being caught up in the street life. She's watched girls quit school after getting pregnant. What she has not witnessed, at least not on any large scale, is an honest discussion about the dropout epidemic in Indianapolis.

"It seems everybody has their blinders on," she says. "They either don't know or don't want to know."
Toya is determined to make people listen. She recently created three panels for a quilt designed to raise awareness about the dropout epidemic and helped conduct a student-led research project on problems in IPS schools.

Toya is driven in part by her own family’s experiences. Her mother quit school before returning to earn a degree when Toya was in kindergarten.

She speaks with the bluntness of a teenager -- but also with the passion of someone who has seen too many friends leave school. "We're in a system that's designed for us to fail," she says.

**Suburban epidemic**
Growing enrollments may mask the extent of dropout rates in suburban districts, where social and economic issues often mirror urban problems.

May 17, 2005

Taxpayers have given all the best to students at Ben Davis High School.

A first-class fieldhouse, tennis courts and athletic fields pack the sprawling campus. The award-winning marching band has its own lighted outdoor practice area. Champion athletes train at the indoor swimming pool, indoor track and mammoth weight room. Young broadcasters hone skills in state-of-the-art TV and radio studios.

Is there really a dropout crisis in Indianapolis' well-groomed suburbs? Yes.

At Ben Davis, based on the school district's eighth-grade enrollment, about four out of 10 students in the class of 2004 did not graduate on time. And Ben Davis is not alone.

An analysis of Indiana Department of Education statistics shows almost half of the students in Decatur Township's class of 2004 didn't make it from the eighth grade to high school graduation four years later. Yet the district, using the state-approved but deeply flawed formula, reported a 95 percent graduation rate for 2004.

About three of 10 students in the class of 2004 disappeared between eighth grade and graduation in Beech Grove city schools and Pike, Perry and Warren township schools. Johns Hopkins University researcher Robert Balfanz found that Southport and Perry Meridian high schools, both in the Perry Township district, were among 22 schools in the state in which 60 percent or fewer students in the class of 2002 failed to progress from their freshman to senior year.

Unlike with Indianapolis Public Schools, high school enrollment in each of those districts is growing. Transfers can't be used to explain the steady decrease in the numbers as classes move through suburban school systems. Dropouts can.

Derek Redelman, an educational consultant from Indianapolis, says growing enrollments may mask the extent of the dropout epidemic in suburban districts.

Marion County's suburban districts increasingly must confront the same social and economic issues that are battering IPS. Poverty rates are rising (almost 60 percent of students in Wayne Township schools now qualify for free lunches and textbooks, up from 53 percent in the 2001-02 school year). Family breakdowns, criminal records and pregnancy also are driving teens to quit school.
Some students just give up. Matthew Kortz dropped out of Southport High School in 2003 because he had too few credits to earn a diploma with his peers. "I wasn't going to graduate until I was 21," he said.

Ben Davis principal David Marcotte says his school is caught in two contrasting trends. The percentage of students taking Advanced Placement classes doubled in two years. More graduates are earning Core 40 and honors diplomas, and more are advancing to college. The same is true at Decatur Central High School.

But many students also are failing to meet rising expectations. The state's Graduation Qualifying Exam, which students take the first semester of their sophomore year, is a harsh reminder to more than half of the students at Ben Davis and Decatur Central that they have fallen behind.

For the most discouraged students, dropping out becomes a tempting way out. Yet, all the perils of life without a basic education -- low-paying jobs, homelessness, crime and punishment -- are waiting.

"We hear inmates say, 'I flunked (the GQE) for the third time, so why the hell should I stick around,' " says John Nally, a veteran educator with the Indiana Department of Correction.

Eliminating the GQE, or replacing it with another test, isn't the answer. The problem is more with the preparation than the measurement. As in IPS, many students in township schools fall behind early. And never catch up.

"Large urban and diverse high schools across the country are having the same problems as Ben Davis," Marcotte says. "The upper end is doing well, but we've not done a very good job of reaching the bottom. The gap is growing."

As the gap grows between educational haves and have-nots, the implications for society are profound. Well-educated and well-paid workers will be asked to shoulder the increasingly higher costs of social services for the underclass. The middle-class flight from the inner city will become a flight from the inner suburbs. The community will become further divided along economic, racial and ethnic lines.

Indianapolis isn't there yet. But the cracks are widening.

**Graduation Rates for Suburban Townships**

*Class of 2004 from 8th grade to graduation*

- Decatur  53%
- Beech Grove  70%
- Franklin  78%
- Speedway  91%
- Lawrence  81%
- Perry  66%
- Pike  66%
- Warren  68%
- Washington  81%
- Wayne  60%
One person's story
'I was slacking'

May 17, 2005

Matthew Kortz started working with his father as a roofer when he was 13 years old. Now 21, Kortz is still climbing atop roofs, two years after he dropped out of Southport High School.

Kortz's problems in school started early. He was held back in the seventh grade and struggled with English in high school. He quit after realizing he had not earned enough credits to graduate on time.

"I was slacking," he admits.

Kortz dreams of a career as an auto mechanic. He recently enrolled in Ivy Tech State College's GED program. And says his father is encouraging him to progress. "I'm looking for a job where I'm not busting my ass so hard," he says.

'Educational genocide'
Males -- especially black males -- aren't keeping up with the girls.

May 18, 2005

James Johnson isn't sure if his father ever finished high school but thinks "he probably didn't."


As for Johnson's 18-year-old son? He just dropped out, too, after finally reaching his senior year.

Johnson now is obtaining his GED at age 41. From what he can tell, when it comes to finishing high school, "All the men don't."

Yes, the men don't.

More black males are dropping out than graduating from high school.

Just 326, or 25 percent, of about 1,300 black males who entered IPS high schools in 1998 graduated four years later.

Perhaps the 1,000 or so young black men who left moved to other school districts. More likely, they dropped out.

Indianapolis Public Schools is the fifth-worst in the nation in graduating black males, trailing only Cincinnati, New York City, Cleveland and Chatham County, Ga., according to a 2004 study by the Schott Foundation for Public Education.

Only 38 percent of black males graduated from Indiana's high schools in 2002. Just 42 percent of America's black males in the class of 2002 earned diplomas.

Those numbers help explain why only 603,000 black males were attending college while nearly 800,000 were serving prison time in 2000.

As Schott Foundation President Rosa Smith says, this is "educational genocide."
In Indiana and the rest of the nation, white males graduate at significantly higher rates than blacks. That's not true in IPS.

Only 183 white males -- or 23 percent of the freshmen entering IPS high schools in 1998 -- graduated in 2002. About 600 young white men probably dropped out.

They're like Manual High School freshman David Kline, who says, "None of my family has graduated."

David, like his father and brother, has had a run-in with the law and landed in juvenile hall. He expects to follow their example by dropping out.

His plans? "I'm in a band. I'm a lead vocalist. We've already played at (venues). I mean, our band's already getting big."

Here's the reality: White male dropouts are five times more likely to serve prison time than the national average, according to Bruce Western of Princeton University. About 37 percent of black male dropouts are likely to end up incarcerated.

The academic gap for males, both blacks and whites, appears to be widening. Men made up 43 percent of the college student population in 2000 versus 58 percent 36 years ago, according to Pell Institute senior scholar Tom Mortenson.

For growing numbers of college-age women, it means more difficulties in finding equally educated -- and financially stable -- men.

How did we get here?

Indiana's economic dependence on manufacturing helped create a culture in which education was considered to have little practical value. Longtime educators say factory managers in some Indiana towns used to recruit workers in high schools, promising boys steady work if they quit school.

Times have changed. Mind-sets haven't.

In many Indiana families, education still isn't viewed as the gateway to a better life.

Which helps explain why the state ranks 46th in the nation in the educational attainment rate of its population.

Schools haven't done their part in helping males adapt to the reality of a knowledge-based economy. Boys find few male role models in schools; nationally, women make up 75 percent of the teaching ranks.

The fact that teachers are almost always white contributes to cultural differences that keep students and educators from connecting. Cultural and racial differences also factor into the higher rates of suspensions and expulsions of black males.

Males are twice as likely as girls to be diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; 73 percent of the learning disabled population are males. Yet some researchers say the ratio of boys to girls classified with learning disabilities should be about 50/50.

All this ultimately shows up in high schools in the form of dropouts.

Males accounted for 425, or 59 percent, of the freshmen entering Northwest High in 2001. Four years later, they made up only 48 percent of the 2005 senior class.
Three-hundred thirty-five young men at Northwest High never made it to their senior year. And the story is consistent across the city.

Something is terribly wrong.

IPS has one of the lowest black male graduation rates in the nation. Other school districts with the lowest rates for black males (based on systems with 10,000 or more black males):

**Male Graduation Rates 2001-02**

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<th>Location</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Difference</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<td>25%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>12% (Savannah)</td>
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<td>25%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>- 2%</td>
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<td>26%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinellas County, FL</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>26% (St. Petersburg)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>22%</td>
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**Gap in Achievement**

Graduation rates for IPS based on ninth-grade enrollment (2002)

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<th>Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Total Hispanic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total White</td>
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**One Person's story**

'I honestly think I can'

May 18, 2005

Switching houses and schools meant that 16-year-old Jeremy Bucci never had much educational stability. Since starting his freshman year at Manual High School last fall, he has cut 29 of his world history classes, had run-ins with a teacher and been suspended once.

Cut one more class or miss another day of school and Bucci will be packed off to New Beginnings alternative school. Three of Bucci's cousins already attend there, and, he says, "they don't like it."

Bucci says he realized he must "watch what I do. Pay attention to what my actions are."

But he's not certain if he will stay in school or follow his father's path by dropping out.

"Some days, some point in time, I think I can make it, I think I can do it," Bucci says.

"Then there's other times when people tell me I can't do it and I might as well stop. Well, I think I can do it. I honestly think I can."

left behind: A star editorial board series
Early warning signs
IPS looks to smaller high schools to keep kids involved, but the damage often is done before then.

May 19, 2005

Indianapolis Public Schools Board President Kelly Bentley admits that "30 percent are graduating, if that," from the district's high schools.

She concedes "teacher A isn't talking to teacher B" about at-risk students. And once students drop out, Bentley says, "We don't know where the kids go."

What's the solution? Bentley and other IPS leaders think the answer partly lies in converting five main high schools into 16 smaller learning centers in September.

It's a strategy other failing districts are adopting, including schools in New York City, Los Angeles, Baltimore and Boston.

Backing the small-schools movement are such big-name education reformers as Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates, whose foundation poured $11.3 million into the initiatives at IPS and other Indianapolis schools.

Gates argues that "our high schools -- even when they're working as designed -- cannot teach our kids."

The number of students left behind is staggering. Each year more than 20,000 students drop out of Indiana high schools. Roughly 100,000 students have quit so far this decade.

Educators once thought modern high schools, with their teeming populations and sprawling campuses, were the height of efficiency and effective teaching. What they actually do: allow students to fall out of sight, out of mind and out of school.

Vanessa Smith remembers Arlington High as "more like a hangout" than an actual school.

"Teachers and the class volume were ridiculous. Sometimes people were standing up," Smith says.

She eventually dropped out.

Angelique Twyman says Arsenal Tech's campus is "too open for someone who's not focused."

By her sophomore year, "I had just skipped. Then I skipped a week. And then I didn't go back."

As envisioned by IPS and the University of Indianapolis' Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning, teachers at small schools will be able to brainstorm about future Angeliques because enrollment will be capped at 400 students. The small learning centers will be housed at high schools but will have their own teams of teachers and administrators.

Yet nobody's certain small schools will help. A study of one small-school concept -- First Things First in Kansas City, Kan. -- proclaims the program decreased the likelihood of dropping out by more than 90 percent. The study, however, was based on snapshots of raw data, not enough to prove long-term results.

Small schools also don't confront the reality that students are damaged long before high school.
Problems begin at home. Research indicates that poor parents on average devote a mere 25 hours of reading time to their children from birth until they reach first grade. Middle-class parents, in contrast, spend as much as 1,700 hours reading to their children. Schools can alleviate that skills gap -- and better prepare a child for tough schoolwork ahead -- through early, intense remediation.

Harlem's Children's Zone, the community education and charter school outfit run by teaching guru Geoffrey Canada, offers a model. At its "baby college," parents are taught about child development and given books to read to their children. Preschoolers attending its "Harlem Gems" program are put through a rigorous course of reading-related exercises.

But Indiana doesn't pay for or require full-day kindergarten, much less preschool education. IPS offers full-day kindergarten, but only to 230 students on a lottery basis.

Most children lose out on needed intervention.

The problems continue in elementary school classrooms. As Indiana University researcher Russ Skiba points out, "The longer kids are in school, the less we can say their problems” are attributable to bad parenting.

Schools place less emphasis on reading skills development just as it's needed most in subjects such as math and social studies. Weak readers get weaker still.

Social promotion, in which students are passed on despite their performance, exacerbates the problem. Yet leaving them back won't work unless the student gets intense remedial education. And most don't.

Pacers Academy Principal Anita Silverman and Ken Poole of Manual High both say that the old way of standing in front of students to lecture them doesn't work anymore. Yet many teachers resist change.

The fact that most teachers are white and female can set up cultural clashes, especially for black males. Those conflicts often lead to suspensions and expulsions, which contribute to students giving up on school.

Indiana ranks number one in the nation in the rate of suspensions and among the top 10 in expulsions. Blacks account for 18 suspensions per 100 elementary students, six times that of whites, according to a study by IU's Skiba and M. Karega Rausch. By middle school, the rate of suspension for blacks is five times that of whites.

For failing students, there aren't many places to turn.

Alternative schools such as IPS' Pacers Academy can help some students. Yet a 2003 University of Minnesota study points out that there are few data on alternative schools' performance.

All of this has severe consequences, not only for students but the state itself. Stan Jones, Indiana's commissioner of higher education, can't see "how we can move forward" until the dropout crisis is abated.

He's right. Indiana can't.
The five major IPS high schools reported high suspension and chronic absentee rates for the 2003-04 school year. A total of 189 students were expelled.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Chronic Absentees</th>
<th>Students Suspended</th>
<th>Number of Expulsions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arlington</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arsenal Tech</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad Ripple</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emmerich Manual</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chronic absenteeism is defined as ten or more unexcused absences in a single school year.

One person's story
'Like almost a passport'

May 19, 2005

Dropping out runs in Julie Johnson's family. Her father left school at age 12 to take care of his family. Husband James dropped out after his freshman year. And none of her four children finished high school; one son left despite having reached his senior year at Cardinal Ritter High School.

Johnson herself went to Northwest and Arsenal Tech, but "my interest wasn't in school" and so she left after her sophomore year. The next decades, she struggled as a housekeeper at a Courtyard by Marriott, clocking in bus drivers for IndyGo and tending bar at the Westin Hotel Downtown.

Now entering invoices for Burlington Coat Factory, Johnson, at age 41, realizes an education is "like almost a passport" to better jobs. So she attends GED prep courses with her husband at the Indiana Opportunities Industrialization Centers State Council.

A better job isn't the only reason why she's back for her GED. She also wants to motivate her eight -- soon to be nine -- grandchildren to stay in school. Says Johnson: "At least if I have something to show for it, it keeps them going."

A heavy burden
Indianapolis and Indiana are paying a hefty price for failing to deal realistically with the dropout epidemic.

May 20, 2005

Joseph Matthews III knows where the dropouts go.

They're slinging burgers at fast-food joints for "eight to 10 bucks an hour." Or working as full-time customer service reps for $18,000 a year, says Matthews, president of the Indiana Opportunities Industrialization Centers State Council.

They're also showing up inside prisons for drug dealing or other felonies. Some are wearing ankle bracelets, for which they pay $84 every week, as a condition of their home detention. How do they get the cash to pay for the bracelet? Don't ask, Matthews says.

They're seeking shelter at the Julian Center from abusive lovers. Applying at a local welfare office for food stamps. Or trading food for drugs.
In any case, "they are not emerging as your productive Hoosier," says Matthews, whose program helps dropouts earn a GED.

Indianapolis and Indiana are paying a heavy price for failing to deal realistically with the dropout epidemic. At a time when an educated work force is essential to economic development, almost three of 10 students in Indiana are not graduating from high school.

Two facts are closely linked: Indiana was 44th in the nation in job creation last year, and it's 46th in the educational attainment level of its population. The first number won't rise until the second is confronted.

Traditional manufacturing, where past generations of Indiana workers with a high school diploma or less often found employment, is in steady decline. Construction accounts for only 5 percent of all jobs. A student who leaves high school today without a diploma finds few opportunities waiting.

The result: Average incomes for male dropouts have fallen 35 percent (in 2002 dollars) since 1971; wages for female dropouts fell 14 percent during the same period.

Former Arlington High student Vanessa Smith dropped out during her junior year after landing in a day adult class with other pregnant teens. She now makes $10.50 an hour as a certified nursing assistant, "a lot more than I can make anywhere else without a GED."

Yet she admits she needs "a little more than that" to support her 3-year-old son.

Most dropouts are condemned to chronic unemployment or underemployment. Only 35 percent of black dropouts between ages 16 and 24 are currently employed. Sixty percent of all dropouts were unemployed last year.

Prison also snares many, especially the men. About 37 percent of black male dropouts have done a stint in prison, according to Princeton University researcher Bruce Western. Sixty-eight percent of state prison inmates -- including 27 percent of whites -- were dropouts, according to a 1997 survey by the U.S. Department of Justice.

"Roosevelt said in the Great Depression that we as a society are losing the human resource. We're losing the human resource today," says Harry Sykes, supervisor of education at Plainfield Correctional Facility.

Sykes says the typical inmate enrolled in the prison's GED program dropped out at age 15.

Somewhere on life's downward trajectory, Tawnya McCrary encounters many of the men and women who've suffered through low pay, lost jobs and prison.

McCrary helps teach job and life skills to dropouts who attend the OIC's Indianapolis training center. She's something of a mother figure, calling to make sure they attend class and lecturing on how to dress for a job interview instead of showing up in a "T-shirt, jeans and house shoes."

She tries to teach the GED students a new way of thinking about life. "They're in crisis mode day to day," she says.

Yet, despite the hard work invested to obtain it, the General Equivalency Diploma, really isn't equal to graduating from high school. A 1998 U.S. Department of Education summary of research on the GED concluded that on average recipients earned less than high school graduates, although they took home wages 5 to 11 percent higher than dropouts'.
More bad news: Fewer dropouts are pursuing a GED. In Indiana, the number of people earning a GED declined 9 percent from 1995 to 2004. In Indianapolis Public Schools, the number dropped 16 percent from 2002 to 2004.

GED students also tend to be younger than in the past. Joseph Matthews notes the fastest-growing group of Indiana OIC's students are from 16 to 20; they now make up one-quarter of the program's 635 GED students. As Johns Hopkins researcher Robert Balfanz points out, many haven't passed 10th grade, which means they're ill-prepared for the GED's academic challenges.

Drive along Capitol Avenue near 38th Street in Indianapolis and you'll see the young men hanging out. No jobs. Few prospects.

Indiana is losing, as Harry Sykes says, the human resource.

And all Hoosiers are bearing the cost in higher taxes, fewer jobs and lower incomes.

**Average Annual Income based on education**

- Professional Degree $81,500
- Doctoral Degree $70,700
- Master's Degree $52,300
- Bachelor's Degree $42,200
- Associate's Degree $33,400
- High School Grad $26,200
- HS Dropout $19,000

80% of prison inmates have no high school diploma
8% of active military (2001) have no high school diploma

**One person's story**

*I'm learning to be a man*

May 20, 2005

Dorian McMiller ran into trouble early in life. At 14, he was arrested for armed robbery.

At 16, he stole a car.

"I wasn't really thinking about school," says Dorian, now 18 and a dropout from Arlington High School. "I was thinking of trouble."

Dorian now lives on his own, trying to pay his bills by working long hours at a variety of jobs. He earns $6.50 an hour making sandwiches at a Subway restaurant Downtown. He dreams of becoming a writer and reads whenever he has the time. Maya Angelou is a favorite author.

Dorian hesitates, however, when asked if he'll go back to school. Night classes seem daunting for someone struggling to survive day to day. He's too busy fighting to make it on his own.

"I'm learning to be a man," he says.
The challenge ahead

Confronting the dropout problem with honesty is the first step among many that educators, government and the public must take.

May 21, 2005

Jacquieala Anderson began to turn her life around after coming to this realization: "I've never completed anything."

Anderson, who dropped out of Arlington High School, enrolled last year in Job Corps and has earned her GED. Hard times have not passed, however. She lost her $8-an-hour job at Washington Inventory Services last month.

How can educators, state government and local communities reach the more than 20,000 Hoosiers who every year, like Anderson, quit school?

No easy answers exist. The dropout crisis is deeply rooted in societal problems such as poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, family turmoil and parts of the Indiana culture that do not place a high value on education.

Yet, there are crucial moves educators, state government and community leaders can -- and must -- make to keep more children from following the desperate paths of high school dropouts.

Indiana's Graduation Rates 2002
72% of all Indiana students graduated
53% of black students in Indiana graduated
50% of Hispanic students in Indiana graduated
75% of white students in Indiana graduated

Educators

1. The first step is to tell the truth.

Education officials like state Superintendent of Public Instruction Suellen Reed have known for years that the graduation rates they report to the public are grossly inflated.

Their failure to speak out about low and declining graduation rates has masked the extent of the dropout epidemic and kept the public in the dark.

2. Local school boards and superintendents, especially in Indianapolis Public Schools, should write community contracts that set benchmarks for improvement. Business leaders, community organizations and the teachers union should set goals for their participation in helping improve schools. All should then communicate regularly with the public about the expectations set and progress achieved.

3. Teachers who are able to help at-risk students succeed should be better compensated than those working in less demanding environments. Teachers unions should allow administrators greater flexibility in rewarding teachers who take on the greatest challenges.

Also, the practice of intentionally dumping the least-experienced teachers into the most difficult classroom settings needs to end. It sets up both teachers and students to fail.

4. School districts and university schools of education need aggressively to recruit more black,
Hispanic and male teachers. All teachers need improved training in working with students from different cultural backgrounds.

5. School superintendents, principals and teams of teachers should meet regularly with at-risk students, especially black males, to hear their concerns and recommendations for improvement. Listening can go a long way in persuading students that someone cares about their future.

6. Districts, especially suburban schools on building binges, should reduce the frills and divert more dollars to remediation, tutoring and other programs that target at-risk students.

Mixing capital and operating budgets isn't allowed officially, but school administrators could expect few objections if they were to ask to divert construction dollars to pilot programs aimed at improving classroom instruction.

School officials argue that sports and other activities help engage students. That's true. But football teams can still take the field without schools erecting palaces like the $4.3 million stadium built at Franklin Central High School last year.

**State leaders**

1. Indiana must place much greater emphasis on early childhood education. Money is undeniably tight, but Gov. Mitch Daniels and state legislators must give priority to full-day kindergarten and preschool opportunities for at-risk children.

The achievement gap among children begins to widen by the third grade. Early intervention, especially reading remediation, is essential to close the gap.

2. State lawmakers should allow for the creation of additional alternative schools, including charters.

Indianapolis Public Schools Pacers Academy is an alternative school helping to rescue a small number of students. Its methods, built around high-energy teachers and close relationships with students, should be expanded to other schools and districts.

3. Indiana needs a vocal leader to confront the challenge of its low graduation rate. Suellen Reed is in the right position to do it. She must, however, be more forceful and consistent in pointing out the educational system's problems.

**Community**

1. Volunteers are wanted. VISTA volunteers like Jamie Gibson and Kathy Souchet are helping turn at-risk students into leaders in IPS high schools. Tutors and mentors, many from the business world, are helping students learn to read.

But more are needed.

An important piece of reversing the dropout rate is finding individuals who can build strong relationships with students. Someone to ask about home life and homework.

Community groups, including churches and synagogues, have an important role in organizing volunteers and building bridges with schools and students.

2. Business involvement is critical. Executives need to work with educators in setting expectations and measuring outcomes. The business community has long complained about
failing schools, but it must become a better partner in finding solutions.

3. Hoosiers must place greater value on the importance of education. Star editorial writers, in researching this series, encountered a startling number of students and dropouts from families in which no one had graduated from high school.

In other families, education has become secondary to sports and other activities that consume children's time. The importance of education appears for some to be slipping exactly when it's needed most for the health of the state and its young people.

Indiana’s schools must improve. Its educators must adapt to change. Its political leaders must make targeted investments in education. Its community leaders and families must be better engaged in educating their children.

No less than the future of a generation is at stake.

one person's story
'I'm trying to stop the cycle'

May 21, 2005

By the time a letter from the Family and Social Services Administration directed her to take a GED class, Swaquana Anderson was, in her words, "a hot mess."

A mother at age 14, the Illinois native dropped out of Indianapolis' Howe High School two years later. By 18, she stopped taking GED prep courses when she got pregnant again. At age 21, she was a mother of four scraping by with jobs at Subway and Rally's.

She said she was "getting nowhere doing fast food."

GED prep and job-training courses at the Indiana OIC's Indianapolis office led to an internship and then a job there as a receptionist. Now 26, she may earn her GED after taking the test for a second time.

Anderson, the daughter of a dropout, aspires to be a nurse. She also wants a better life for her 12-year-old daughter. "I'm trying to stop the cycle of dropping out," Anderson says.

"I'm trying my best for my kids to not repeat the same cycle."

A word of advice for young black males -- graduate!

May 22, 2005

The education system and the black community are failing young black males, whose high dropout rates are a national disaster, charges Phillip Jackson of the Black Star Project. School reform requires addressing the relationship between black male youth identity and hip-hop culture, says Jose Evans of the Black and Latino Policy Institute. The pair explain how educators and the community must reach out to young blacks to offer them a better future.
Lowest black male graduation rates

“Public Education and Black Male Students: A State Report Card,” a 2004 study by The Schott Foundation for Public Education, identified public school districts with the lowest black male graduation rates in the United States in 2001-02:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Graduation Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati</td>
<td>18 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>24 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleveland</td>
<td>25 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatham County, Ga.</td>
<td>25 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indianapolis</td>
<td>25 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rochester, N.Y.</td>
<td>26 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinellas County, Fla.</td>
<td>26 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oakland, Calif.</td>
<td>27 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milwaukee</td>
<td>28 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>29 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duval County, Fla.</td>
<td>30 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richmond County, Ga.</td>
<td>32 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago and Detroit</td>
<td>33 percent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phillip Jackson: Without a diploma, futures look bleak

Everyone encountering a young black man should give him the most important gift he will ever receive. That gift is not money, clothes, video games, cars or tickets to the latest basketball game. The most important gift for a young black man today is the advice to do what it takes to graduate from high school and develop a career plan. Without a high school diploma and more, young black men become obsolete.

Between 45 and 55 percent of urban black males 20 to 24 years old are out of school and out of work, according to a 2004 report by Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies. Dropout rates for young blacks are increasing, even though leaving high school without a diploma is economic suicide, according to Dr. Neeta Fogg, one of the study's authors.

Without a diploma, there are few legal jobs that a young black man can have that pay enough money to support a family.

Young black men who are out of school and unemployed are more susceptible to illegal activities that lead to incarceration. So far, the black community has not responded sufficiently to this catastrophe involving its young black men. In fact, this problem is not even on the radar screen of many black churches, businesses, elected officials, media outlets, civil rights and social service organizations.

Without an adequate response from the black community, more young black men are sentenced to lives of drugs, gangs and violence. Ultimately, prison and death claim far too many.

The high school dropout rate for young black men is a national disaster. Bill McNary, president of Citizen Action, calls it "unsound, obscene and absurd." We can no longer say that we do not know. Now the question is: Do we care?

The massive failure of schools and the black community to successfully educate black males, and their disproportionately high rates of unemployment and incarceration, are complex issues, but they are still solvable.
A large part of the solution is a return to the basics, with parents and communities taking primary responsibility for educating black males. This starts with the family in the home and continues in school and communities. The extent to which black parents become actively involved in the education of their male children is a measure of how successful their sons will be in life.

While many individuals and institutions, including administrative, legislative and judicial branches of government, have a powerful role to play, this initiative must be driven by the black community. That means it must redirect attention and prioritize efforts and resources toward difference-making endeavors. The survival and success of the entire community demands it.

These efforts include:

• Heavy involvement of black parents, families and community with education.
• Institutionalizing strong, nurturing, effective, child-centered two-parent families.
• Reconnecting black fathers with their children.
• Reinventing a strong culture of academic success for young black men.
• Enhancing principled community structures with activities that augment young black males' social and emotional development.
• Providing them with positive, strong, accessible role models.

Every time anyone encounters a black male child or teenager, ask him: How are you doing in school? What college do you plan to attend? What are your career interests? Take every opportunity to reinforce the importance of education.

While this is a tough problem now, it will become insurmountable unless action is taken immediately. Young black men want and deserve a place in America.

Who is going to tell them that because they don't have good academic skills, because they have dropped out of high schools that failed to sufficiently engage them, because they can't find a job, because they have been to jail, they cannot participate in mainstream America?

When they realize they have become obsolete, are we ready for their response?

Jackson is executive director of the Black Star Project in Chicago.

Jose Evans: Hip-hop defines black urban youth

I am a product of the early "old school" hip-hop generation. Born in the early 1970s, I had the opportunity to experience the birth of an entire culture. During the 1970s, '80s and early '90s, this culture had an understanding about the civil rights movement, racial identity and political and social injustice.

Just look at the artists who influence both my way of thinking and living. Artists such as KRS 1, Public Enemy, X-Clan and, yes, even 2Pac and NWA understood that this new hip-hop generation was hungry for someone to speak out against the struggles, injustices and racism found in the community and in our schools.

Today's hip-hop culture, represented by 50 Cent, The Game and T.I., have a different approach. Like their predecessors, these artists speak to black youth; however, their lyrics focus on quick money, getting rich and living beyond the rules.

In "Locating the Dropout Crisis," Johns Hopkins researchers flagged 2,000 high schools as "dropout factories." Between 1990 and 2002, other than Stockton, Calif., Indianapolis Public
Schools was the only district where students had, and continue to have, no choice but to go to a dropout factory.
In his book, "Black in School," Shawn Ginwright discusses the inability of educators to connect with, inspire and move black urban working-class students. He argues that the cultural disconnect between the civil rights and hip-hop generations is an obstacle to reaching urban black youth, who are simply not motivated or inspired by reform efforts in which their urban identities are not represented.

While multicultural reform tries to balance culturally biased and racist curricula by infusing West African principles, they are rarely connected to black urban experiences -- marginalizing hip-hop and replacing one form of cultural mismatch with another. Obviously, with low graduation rates, success with multicultural reforms has been limited.

In the 1970s and '80s, multicultural and Afro-centric education reforms attempted to expose the Eurocentric bias found in urban schools and connect African values and classroom practices. These reforms aimed to reclaim, reconstruct and reposition black youth identity.

Today, black youth identity is often defined by this hip-hop. It rises out of a context of struggle and is expressed in unique cultural forms of an urban esthetic of music, art and dress that redefines, reasserts and constantly re-establishes what it means to be urban and black.

Black youth of the post-civil rights era are politically savvy. They see the corruption and shallowness of society. This perspective is key to understanding the experiences, motivation and aspirations of these youth. Hip-hop is more than a voice; it is a form of political resistance. Hip-hop calls attention to their struggles and validates their everyday experiences, providing a vision of social justice.

Indeed, Afro-centrism exposed racism. Yet alone it has little meaning for youth at the bottom of the economic ladder. Simply celebrating students' culture is not enough while failing to challenge or even acknowledge the effects of poverty on school success.

Afro-centric strategies came to influence academic outcomes through affecting racial identity. Yet, the "new" hip-hop generation's identity is more than race. In a global village, it now includes class, religion, language, neighborhood, multiracial background, politics, gang affiliation, music and dress.

Ginwright suggests multicultural educators validate black youth identity. Some educators are critical of students who see being black as speaking ebonics, braided hair, sagging pants and skewed hats. They say that blackness is knowing black history and appreciating African values, not dressing like a gangster. Right or wrong, this disconnects hip-hop from older generations.

Hip-hop culture emerged from tremendous economic, social and cultural pressures on black urban youth. By validating this culture, their struggle for racial and economic justice is also affirmed. The civil rights generation and the new black middle class must tap into the oppositional culture of hip-hop to revive new and more inclusive forms of schooling and democratic possibilities.

Ginwright also suggests black educators see hip-hop culture as an asset, not a liability. He does not deny its negative influences and stresses that it must become self-critical. Yet, he wants educators not to deny its promise. Armed with an understanding of inequality and a passion for social justice, black youth around the country want a say in decisions that impact their lives.

While multiculturalism develops identity of black students, it must help create a democratic climate that provides students this voice. In democratic schools, they can demand their schools be equal to the best and receive help in solving the problems of poverty they face every day. This holds great promise for effective educational reform strategies.
Multicultural reform emphasizing racial and economic justice enables black youth to develop a political awareness that can translate to both citizenship and educational performance. This provides opportunity for civil rights and hip-hop generations to work together transforming schools and communities.

The urban experience is shaped by economic isolation, poverty and struggle. Hip-hop culture legitimizes and celebrates experiences of violence, pain, fear, love and hope for youth who are overlooked in mainstream America. To seriously discuss school reform, we must consider the relationship between black youth identity and hip-hop culture. Failing to do so, Ginwright says, is a gross oversight.

Evans, of Indianapolis, former director of the Indiana State Commission of the Social Status of Black Males, is director of the Black and Latino Policy Institute.

**Beating the odds**

Some students overcome dire situations to earn a diploma. The key? Relationships with caring teachers and mentors.

May 22, 2005

The dropouts aren't hard to find. They're making your sandwiches, fixing your roof, changing the linen on your elderly parent's nursing home bed.

Amid despair over so many young people falling behind, however, there is hope. Some students are bound for success despite fierce adversity. Their stories can help explain what the community and schools must do to help others:

'The best thing I can do'

Terrell Parker could have become a number, another young black male who dropped out of school and into trouble.

Terrell's mother and father quit school. His brother did as well. When Terrell graduates in two years -- and by every indication he will graduate -- he'll become the first member of his family to complete high school.

Many of Terrell's friends also have dropped out. He says some must find work to help support their families. Others, he says, simply don't care about education in schools where they don't feel they belong. "The school system isn't designed for us," he says.

Terrell has become a leader as a sophomore at Indianapolis Public Schools' newly reopened Washington Community School. He's on the student council and is a force behind a student diversity club he helped create to ease racial tensions at the school. He and other council members also helped start an after-school tutoring program at Washington.

What makes Terrell different from the 20,000 students who drop out of school every year in Indiana?

"I realize (dropping out) is not the life I want to have," the 16-year-old says softly. "I realize graduating is the best thing I can do if I want to better myself."

Terrell had help in learning that lesson. Teachers noticed his leadership skills and commitment to education while he still was in middle school. In seventh grade, he participated in a summer science program at Purdue University. He has returned each summer. If he completes the program and decides to pursue a degree in science at Purdue, the cost of his education will be covered.
Terrell also formed a friendship with Kathy Souchet, a VISTA volunteer at Washington, who acts as a mentor. "He has a drive to succeed," she says.

Encouraging teachers. An adult mentor and friend. Help from a program aimed at at-risk students that builds long-term relationships. All are crucial pieces to the puzzle of keeping more students in school.

'I got to see everybody else drop out'

Reda Stewart does the sad math. Of her 30 or so friends in middle school, four are still in school. Only three, including herself, will graduate from high school on time.

What happened to the rest?

"Three are dead. Ten to 12 are in jail," Reda says. "Others quit school and disappeared. I got to see everybody else drop out."

Life has kicked Reda hard in 18 years. The drug trade and other crimes are rampant in her Southside neighborhood. She has a strained relationship with her father, referring to him only as "the donor," Her sister dropped out and Reda once asked for the papers that would mark her own official exit from school. "Everything was closing in on me," she says of the dark days.

But she decided to stick it out, and she'll graduate from IPS' Pacers Academy this month. Reda is convinced the alternative school was a key difference in her outcome. "I wouldn't have graduated in a normal high school," she says.

She plans to attend college in the fall, studying business management. The state's 21st Century Scholars Program, available to low-income students who meet academic standards and avoid legal trouble, will pay her college costs.

The alternative setting and the promise of state financial aid were important factors in helping Reda overcome a harsh background.

But Anita Silverman, principal of the Pacers Academy, says there was something even more essential. "The key to reducing the drop out rate is relationships," she says.

Silverman places much of the responsibility for building those relationships on teachers, the frontline warriors in the trenches every day with students.

Students and educators repeatedly told Star editorial writers who researched this series that good teachers are crucial to keeping students in school. "Would you want a mediocre brain surgeon? You don't want a mediocre teacher teaching your children," Silverman says. "Teaching is harder than being a principal."

Good teachers and good schools, people and institutions willing to do whatever it takes to reach troubled students, are essential to increasing unacceptably low graduation rates.

Yet, if Indiana and Indianapolis are finally to confront their dropout epidemic, state and local leaders must avoid the temptation of asking the schools to solve the challenge alone.

The dropout epidemic is not solely an IPS problem. It's not just a school problem. It's a community crisis that must be confronted honestly and boldly by a range of political, community and educational leaders.

Terrell and Reda will make it. The future of far too many other children in Indiana remains in doubt.
We've got answers to your questions

May 22, 2005

Readers responded passionately to The Star Editorial Board's series on high school dropouts, which ends today. Here are a few of the more common questions:

Q. Why are we hearing about low graduation rates now?
A. The Star's series was spurred by the release of national studies in recent months by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, the Educational Testing Service, the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and the Manhattan Institute. All found that either Indiana's or Indianapolis Public Schools' actual graduation rates were much lower than claimed, based on data from the 2001-2002 school year. The federal government's No Child Left Behind act is triggering the release of the data.

Q. Why did The Star use eighth-grade enrollment figures to determine the high school completion rate for school districts?
A. We used eighth-grade numbers as the baseline because students who do not earn enough academic credits to progress to their sophomore year are still listed as freshmen no matter how long they are in school. That tends to inflate ninth-grade enrollment. To look at individual high schools, however, in a large district such as IPS, we had to use ninth-grade enrollment.

Researchers disagree on which numbers are best to use as the baseline. Schott Foundation and Johns Hopkins University researchers relied on ninth-grade enrollment. Manhattan Institute researchers used an average enrollment between eighth, ninth and 10th grades.

Depending on the formula used, graduation rates for Indianapolis Public Schools vary from a low of 28 percent to a high of 47 percent.

Q. Why wasn't this series on the front page?
A. Although grounded in thorough research and fact, the series was an Editorial Board project that contained opinion throughout the daily pieces.

Q. Why is the community town hall at a township high school rather than in IPS?
A. We debated this one internally but after listening to community input decided to stage the town hall at Ben Davis High School on the city's Westside. Our advisers' thoughts were the dropout epidemic is a communitywide, not just an IPS, problem. By taking the event to a suburban high school that is struggling with its dropout crisis, we hope to underscore that point.

Q. Where do you go from here?
A. First there is the forum. Please attend at 7 p.m. Tuesday at Ben Davis. Beyond that, we're committed to returning to this subject frequently in coming months through editorials and other commentary.