

How to achieve long-term financial security, Denver Post Opinion piece (online)

How to achieve long-term financial security

By Rep. Karen Middleton

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As Colorado wrestles with how to respond to the immediate crisis facing our economy, we must not lose sight of a critical investment in our long-term financial security - increasing the high school graduation rate.

According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, if the dropouts from Colorado's high school class of 2008 instead graduated with their peers, they would earn over \$4 billion of additional income over their lifetimes. That figure is more than \$5 billion if we simply raise the high school graduation rate of African-American, Native American and Hispanic students - 65 percent, 59 percent and 57 percent respectively in 2007 - to be equal to that of their White peers - 82 percent - by 2020.

Consider that these students would pay income taxes on those earnings, are less likely to require state or locally funded social services, and are more likely to start or attract new businesses. Not to mention the increased likelihood that their own children will graduate from high school. The boost to our economy would be profound and lasting. The impact upon our state if we do not address this issue will be devastating.

Our educational system has never graduated all students, and we have spent years implementing piecemeal efforts to

graduate more students, so why should we expect something different now? For one thing, we have research that demonstrates what actually works. While effective interventions range from simple changes in course grading policies to student attendance tracking to the creation of multiple educational pathways, all of these initiatives have one thing in common - using currently available data to identify students' needs more accurately and early enough in their educational careers to make a difference.

Certainly some dropout recovery programs and GED or other diploma options will continue to be a necessity for some students. However, we now know how to prevent the overwhelming majority of students from ever dropping out.

Colorado is uniquely well-positioned to build upon these efforts and address the dropout crisis statewide. Gov. Bill Ritter recognized the urgency of this issue when he committed in his Colorado Promise to cut the dropout rate in half in 10 years - a bold and unprecedented statement by any governor in any state. A collaboration underway by the Colorado Children's Campaign, Colorado Youth for a Change and the Partnership for Families and Children is using research from the Center For Social Organization of Schools at John Hopkins University to develop effective interventions in Colorado school districts that currently account for almost half of the state's dropouts.

A commitment at the highest level of state leadership to solve this problem, coupled with practical, on-the-ground efforts means the time is now to create a roadmap for the state to increase our high school graduation rate. For this reason, I have introduced a bill that would provide state resources to schools and specify focused state action to solve this problem - from best practices to technical assistance to possible grant funds. House Bill 1243 builds upon the good work already ongoing in some Colorado schools and provides a means for disseminating that information and expertise to all schools.

As a state, we invest billions of dollars every year in our children's education. It is in our collective and economic best interest to see that investment through. Raising high school graduation rates is a pressing priority that won't just happen when our economy gets better. Targeting our attention toward evidence-based practices and policies, however, will accomplish this goal and contribute to rebuilding a strong economy.

Democratic Rep. Karen Middleton is from Aurora.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is an online-only column and has not been edited.