



Online commentary: High school dropouts need alternative paths to jobs

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Jack Kresnak is the President & CEO of Michigan's Children, a statewide, nonpartisan and nonprofit advocacy organization based in Lansing.

Just weeks ago we celebrated the success of our graduating high school seniors. We went to their open houses and offered congratulations. Now many of them are going off to college, doing what we need for Michigan's economy to prosper.

But what about the thousands of their peers who didn't graduate? Those who dropped out or are entering their fifth or sixth year of high school. What are we doing to help them become educated, skilled workers and taxpayers?

It's a problem affecting us all. In 2009, 16,124 Michigan students – 11% of the student body – dropped out. Another 19,000 failed to graduate in the typical four years. Combined, that's nearly a quarter of students who didn't graduate

after four years of high school.

That tells us:

- Too many young people aren't succeeding in traditional high schools.
- Alternative paths are needed to ensure all youths at least the basic high school education.

The costs are too high to delay action. Dropouts earn on average less than half the income of a college graduate. They cost communities and the state with foregone tax revenues and drain our coffers with much higher rates of poverty, unemployment, incarceration, substance abuse and teen parenting. And they are reducing the size and quality of our workforce, thereby limiting our economic growth potential.

As part of his education reform package, Gov. Rick Snyder recently proposed the "Any Time, Any Place, Any Way, Any Pace" learning model. While much has been

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made of it tying **funding** to students rather than districts and requiring districts to allow school-of-choice, it's important to note the model contains a key solution to our dropout problem by recognizing that all kids do not learn the same. This model allows flexibility in learning by incorporating online learning, dual enrollment, blended learning and early college attendance.

We hope it also will look to build on innovative programs like **Young Detroit Builders** where low-income 18- to 24-year-olds earn a GED and learn career skills by building or rehabbing housing for low-income families in Detroit. Participants divide their time between the alternative school and the construction site, and receive counseling, job development and career assistance.

It's making a huge difference in Detroit where in the past 17 years, Young Detroit Builders has helped rebuild 800 homes and the lives of countless young adults, including Alanna who was abandoned by her drug-addicted mother when she was 2 years old. Alanna turned to alcohol to ease her struggles and dropped out of school when she had her first child at 18.

"This program has taught me how to be consistent and determined and motivated," Alanna said in a recent episode of ABC's Secret Millionaire. "Now I can go to college. Now I can do something to show my kids that if I can do it you can do it and better than I did it."

Innovative programs like this raise Michigan's graduation rates and move

Michigan forward. But its operating budget, funded through city and federal grants, has been cut \$350,000 this year. Michigan needs to support these programs as an investment in our workforce. We need to give schools incentives to work with higher education and workforce development partners to provide alternate paths and supports. And we need to **invest** in parent support, health services, and quality early childhood education that help get our students on the right paths early on and stay on them.

So as our kids start the new school year, we also have our assignment: to be smarter about how we are equipping them to be our future leaders and workers.

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