



Area educators address high school dropouts

By **LINDSAY VanHULLE**

lvanhulle@record-eagle.com

September 05, 2008 12:00 am

—

TRAVERSE CITY -- Efforts to keep students from dropping out of high school need to start within the first five years of their lives, area educators say.

Students are more likely to quit school, they argue, if school districts fail to provide early opportunities for them -- especially those from low-income, at-risk backgrounds.

Roughly 15 people, mostly educators, attended a forum Thursday that sought to address the issue of high school dropouts.

The session was hosted by the Michigan Education Association, the state's largest teachers union, and a handful of statewide children's advocacy groups.

About 10 local teachers and administrators offered anecdotal evidence, cited national research and proposed strategies aimed at reducing the number of students who don't finish high school.

The state needs to fund preschool opportunities for all children, said Jayne Mohr, associate superintendent with Traverse City Area Public Schools.

"That truly is the beginning," Mohr said.

But universal preschool programs aren't likely given the state's current fiscal challenges, said Jack Kresnak, a former Detroit Free Press reporter and president of advocacy group Michigan's Children, who served as a panelist.

It would be more effective, he said, for the state to fund programs for specific segments of a population, such as those from poorer homes.

"It's a fairly well-known fact that poverty is poison for children's brains," he said. "As a society, if we can focus on the early kids, we can prevent a problem."

In addition to Mohr, others present were TCAPS Superintendent James Feil and Konrad Molter, an assistant principal at West Senior High. No Traverse City school board members attended.

Thursday's session was the sixth of 10 scheduled this year across Michigan.

All input will be presented to legislators in October in hopes of drafting policies that would keep students in school.

Forming relationships with peers and teachers also helps students feel more connected to school, other administrators said.

West Senior High began a mentoring program this fall that pairs freshmen with upperclassmen.

And charter schools, by design, provide smaller class settings that nurture students, said Cameron Owens, school leader at Traverse City College Preparatory Academy.

The school has about 100 students this year, nearly double the 55 from its inaugural year last year, Owens said.

"Some kids just need something small," he said.

The state recently released graduation and dropout rates for the class of 2007 in all of Michigan's public schools. The data, as required by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, only includes students who graduate in four years.

In a small district like Frankfort-Elberta Area Schools, funding an alternative school similar to Traverse City High School would help curb the dropout rate, teacher Anne Gwaltney said.

The district's rate was 10 percent, or about six students out of 60, according to the data.

"In many cases, we've had them from seventh grade to 12th grade," she said. "If you have two kids who drop out, you have a very high percentage."

Copyright © 1999-2008 cnhi, inc.

Photos



About 15 people attended the Michigan Education Association dropout forum held at the Traverse Area District Library. It's one of 10 being held around the state this year to gather feedback and suggestions on ways to curb the dropout problem in Michigan. Record-Eagle