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EXTRA CREDIT blog

Texas Fails High School | The Nation

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As should be obvious, Texas is no place for a liberal education. But, with Thomas Jefferson and evolution in the cross-hairs, policymakers in the Lone Star State have overlooked a far more dangerous trend: the appalling high school dropout rate.

A recent report from Education Week and the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center shows that the nation's graduation rate dropped for the second consecutive year, following about a decade of improvements. Three out of every 10 American public students will fail to finish high school, but in Texas that dropout rate increases to about 35 percent, according to the report.

Moreover, Dallas and Houston are named as two of 25 national "dropout epicenters" from whose high schools come one-fifth of all dropouts. Texas policymakers seem wholly unaware of this crisis, since the Texas Education Agency calculates the graduation and dropout rates in a manner that puts them at 88 and 12 percent, respectively. At schools like Robert E. Lee in Houston, where in 2008 the federal calculations placed the graduation rate somewhere in the thirties, those numbers seem almost comical.

Played out against a backdrop of tens of thousands of students who will ultimately make poverty-level wages, the debate about how best to quantify graduation rates—(are they just bad or really, really bad?)—is distracting. The statistical discrepancies prevent the public from taking immediate steps befitting the urgent nature of the problem. Texas sets its sights unreasonably low, aiming for a 70 percent graduation rate under the federal No Child Left Behind act, while most other states shoot for about 82 percent. And some combination of these expectations and TEA's graduation inflation has led to a lack of awareness about the causes of the state's dropout crisis.

This summer, the ACLU of Texas is working to counter widespread misinformation and ignorance with its "Youth Rights in Texas" conference on July 31st. With Ed Burns, co-creator

of HBO's "The Wire,", in attendance, the event promises to discuss alternatives to the harsh disciplinary measures that marginalize inner-city students.

"So much of school today has been criminalized," says Dotty Griffith of the ACLU of Texas. "Throwing a spit-wad on a bus can get you a Class C misdemeanor. Minor infractions are now cast into the criminal justice system. Well once someone gets into that, it's hard to get out of." Constitutionally, the ACLU is concerned about the manner in which these punishments are meted out. And with good reason: A report by Texas Appleseed, a nonprofit based out of Austin, shows that minority and special education students are most likely to be put in some form of in-school suspension or alternative schooling facility, and that these methods of punishment are pipelines to dropping out. The report also demonstrates that where a child attends school, rather than the offense itself, is a greater predictor of the degree of punishment she will receive.

The Texas Democratic Party, in its 2010 platform, claims that it seeks to address the dropout crisis because, "Of all 50 states, Texas has the highest percentage of adults who have not completed high school." The party then outlines "specific solutions," like "expanded access to early childhood education" and "equitable distribution of highly qualified teachers." Elsewhere in the state, small steps are being taken by community leaders. Liberty Campus, in Houston, is a 200-student, six-evening-a-week campus that serves mostly older students. Though until a few years ago the state only financed daytime high schools with students under the age of 21, recent legislation affords students prorated night classes until the age of 26.

New models of schooling, alternative methods of correction, and preventative community measures are all being considered by civil liberties groups and nonprofits, but it is far more important for policymakers and the public to understand the systemic shortcomings that prevented thousands of Texas students from acquiring diplomas in recent years. Without accurate reports and transparent outcomes, the urgent need to implement high school reforms could pass without notice—and that would be a gross disservice to the state's future economy and the dreams of its burgeoning minority populations.

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