

State Conference Focuses On Issue Of School Dropout Rate

By GRACE E. MERRITT The Hartford Courant

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CROMWELL — - Connecticut has one of the lowest drop-out rates in the country, so why hold a major statewide conference on dropout prevention?

The answer lies in the state's future of the state's workforce.

During a daylong conference Monday that featured a panel of students and an inspirational message from the national teacher of the year, experts explained that high school dropouts not only face a lifetime of lower earnings, but also are less likely to marry and more likely to have out-of-wedlock children. They also tend to be in poorer health and have higher rates of incarceration.

"Dropping out of high school is the equivalent of economic suicide," Andrew Sum, of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University, told the crowd in the ballroom of the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Cromwell.

Although Connecticut's dropout rate is 6.2 percent, the 11th-lowest in the country, school officials are still concerned about the rate's impact on the state's economy. Consider the following:

- Fewer than half of Connecticut's dropouts are employed.
- High school dropouts earn an average of \$8,700 a year, compared with \$16,200 for high school graduates and \$28,000 for those with bachelor's degrees;
- 37 percent of dropouts own their own homes, compared with 59.1 percent of high school graduates and 78 percent of those with bachelor's degrees;
- 48.3 percent of high school dropouts were dependent on some form of public assistance compared with 37.3 percent of high school graduates and 22.9 percent of those with bachelor's degrees;
- 41 percent of dropouts are married compared with 54 percent of high school graduates and 62 percent of those with bachelors' degrees;
- 11.1 of male dropouts end up in prison, compared with 3.7 percent of high school graduates and 0.1 percent of those with bachelor's degrees.

"This is not just a school problem. It affects all aspects of our society," Gov M. **Jodi Rell** told about 400 school and town officials gathered at the conference, which was sponsored by the state Department of Education.

Statistics also show that dropouts volunteer less, vote less and contribute less in terms of taxes.

The experts also suggested several ways to tackle the issue, including addressing academic struggles when they emerge in second or third grade, long before high school. They also encouraged teachers to make a personal connection with each student and show that they care about their success.

One of the more surprising findings was that teens who work in high school tend to stay in school. The early work experience seems to underscore the importance of getting a job in the future, Sum said.

Also during the conference, a panel of five students, including three teenage mothers, said that in many cases students do not have a sense of purpose, don't understand that school is an investment in their future and don't connect with teachers.

Robert Felder, a recent graduate of **Southern Connecticut State University**, urged teachers to reach out to students more often and try to understand the obstacles they face.

"Some have parents who are using drugs or selling drugs. They come from violent neighborhoods and abusive families," he said.