

Dropouts: A real problem for U.S.

By Ruben Navarrette Jr.

The media have been abuzz over the critical question of whether Ivy League and other elite universities will follow Harvard's lead and do away with early admissions. Who cares? There is a much more pressing issue that very few people in the media, government or even academia are talking about: It's the fact that, despite massive increases in school spending and one task force after another and countless stabs at education reform, nearly one out of three public high school students won't make it to graduation.

According to most estimates, today's teenagers are dropping out of high school at an alarmingly high rate — about 30 percent, a statistic that researchers say is very close to what it was in the 1970s, when the educational-reform movement was getting under way.

That's across the board — big city or small town, urban or rural district. And researchers say that among black and Latino people, the numbers are as high as 50 percent.

Even worse, the situation doesn't seem to be improving from generation to generation. According to the research, high school completion rates among people in their 20s and 30s are actually lower than they were for their parents and grandparents.

It's not supposed to be this way in a country that prides itself on maintaining a tradition where every generation does better than

the one that came before it. And frankly, we can't afford for it to be this way much longer.

Not in an era of globalization when Americans are competing with people from throughout the world. And not when the costs are so staggering.

The income gap is widening between those who have a high school diploma and those who don't, let alone between those who have a college degree and those who don't. It's happening in many countries around the world, but it is especially true in the United States.

A recent study by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development compared 30 industrialized nations in terms of the income gap between individuals who have an education and those who don't.

The study found that, in the United States, adults who drop out of high school earn just 65 percent of what high school graduates make. Those who have a university degree earn, on average, 72 percent more than those with a high school diploma. The study also found that nearly half — 44 percent — of U.S. adults without high school diplomas have low incomes, earning half of the country's median income or less.

Finland, Belgium, Germany and Sweden have the smallest gaps in earnings between high school dropouts and graduates. In those countries, the financial consequences of making poor educational choices don't seem so severe or so permanent. American

kids don't have that luxury. In the United States, the price for making the wrong decisions and not taking advantage of opportunities can be staggering.

The moral for our students couldn't be clearer: The more education you receive, the higher salary you're likely to earn and the greater the difference will be between you and your colleagues who choose to get less schooling. The lesson for the rest of society is just as clear: When wages go down, as they do for those with less education, it'll only become more difficult for government to pay for things such as public employee retirement pensions, Medicare and Social Security.

Given the seriousness of the problem and its long-term costs, you might think the media and policy-makers would be talking incessantly about the dropout problem. They aren't.

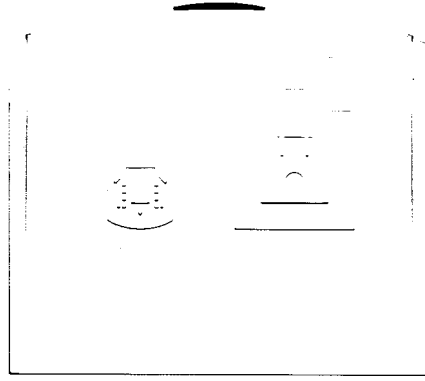
With the exception of a jarring cover story on dropouts in *Time* magazine last spring, there are not that many people in the news business who are eager to talk about the depressing subject of high school dropouts.

The same is true for legislators.

That has to change. This crisis is as real as they come. And if we don't do something about it, well, we may soon get to a point where we don't have the human capital to do much of anything else.

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