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Phoenix Schools Tackle Dropout Rate

By Patricia Hawke

The schools in the United States are considered to be "in crisis" due to the soaring student dropout rate. In his first State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush stated that the national dropout rate was 25 percent.

A recent study conducted by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University puts the current national dropout rate at 25 to 30 percent. Additionally, it indicated that males have the highest dropout rate of 20 to 30 percent and are most likely "at risk" of not graduating from high school with a diploma.

It is said that when a student drops out of school, he/she drops into the criminal justice system. In 2002, the U.S. incarcerated its two millionth person. Of those in prison at the time, 82 percent were high school dropouts.

Dropouts cost our economy billions of dollars each year, and not just from the cost of incarceration. They are an undereducated work force that retards our economic and social development. Businesses cannot depend upon a large portion of graduating students to fill much-needed jobs, which translates to lost government tax revenues. State governments lose money through welfare payments, unemployment and crime prevention programs. Governments, from the president to the local level, have discovered that if they do not pay for programs to decrease the dropout rate now, they will pay much more in the future.

According to the study, the dropout rates vary dramatically by location and racial/ethnic background. The state of Arizona was cited in the study as one of the five states with the lowest graduation rate for 18 year olds. Thus, Phoenix Schools, along with the Arizona State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tom Horne, have made dropout prevention a top priority.

There are three types of dropouts:

- Dropouts -- students who stop coming to school,
- Drop-In Dropouts -- students who come to school but do nothing while they are there, and
- Forced-Out Dropouts -- students who were

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"counseled out" by school counselors and administrators.

Phoenix Schools are addressing all three types of dropouts. Their initiatives are focused on engaging the students, rather than excluding them. They know that programs alone will not change the dropout rate. Only people and relationships can make a difference.

Phoenix schools work with businesses, community organizations and others to identify and develop effective strategies for keeping students in school. They are working to improve student academic success, believing that the high school renewal initiatives are directly linked to a decreased dropout rate. Phoenix schools are focusing on fixing the system, not the student.

Every student in the state of Arizona must now pass three tests in order to graduate high school. The tests measure the students' knowledge against required state standards. Phoenix schools are focusing on the students who do not meet the state required standards. They are tackling their needs by:

- Addressing the students' skill gaps through a state-funded tutoring program,
- Providing the students with their own tutorial guides, customized to their individual needs, and
- Using state-funded tutors, who are qualified to help the students learn the required skills in order to achieve a passing score on the standardized tests.

Phoenix schools are committed to reducing the dropout rate in their schools. Though it is a lengthy and ever changing process, they know the importance of their task. Phoenix schools know they have an obligation to the students and their parents, as well as the businesses and community to improve their dropout rates. More skilled and diploma-graduated students mean better-prepared adults and a better Phoenix.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K-12, providing free, in-depth reports on all U.S. public and private K-12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more on Phoenix schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk-12.com/Arizona/Phoenix/index.html>

New Pilot Program To Nab Sex Offenders Being Tested In Phoenix Schools

By Patricia Hawke

We are a nation focused on eradicating sex offenders from the lives of our children. They are in and near our schools, at the local parks, living next door, and even in some of our churches.

The Phoenix schools, as well as their teachers, administrators and parents, want to protect their children from sexual attacks and abductions. Together with the Maricopa County Sheriff's office, the Phoenix schools have devised a pilot project to apprehend sex offenders and alleged abductors before they can do harm.

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The plan of the Phoenix schools is simple. Two cameras are now located outside the school office of the Royal Palm Middle School, scanning the faces of people who enter. Each camera uses face-scanning technology, designed to compare the scanned faces with the state and national databases of registered sex offenders, missing children, and alleged abductors. If a match is found, a police officer is dispatched to the Phoenix school.

Law enforcement and the Phoenix schools are hopeful that the project succeeds, knowing that anything that protects the children is worth any cost and inconvenience.

Civil libertarians, however, are concerned with privacy more than protecting the children from attack or abduction. They are vocally opposing the Phoenix schools project, citing the potential issues of privacy violations.

Others say the technology is unproven and not reliable. According to Chengjun Liu, professor and researcher of facial recognition technology at New Jersey Institute of Technology, the technology is very promising but currently is not foolproof. Many variables, such as lighting, shadows and facial expression, can affect its accuracy.

Ken Kaplan, engineering director at Hummingbird's Phoenix location and who provided the equipment and software for the Phoenix schools pilot, disagrees. He is confident that facial scanning technology can be used to accurately compare scanned faces with mug shots and snapshots stored in the databases. He believes that false positives are rare situations.

Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, known for instituting chain gangs and issuing pink underwear to county inmates, believes that if it only catches one sex offender at the Phoenix school, then it is worth it. Protecting children from attack and abduction - or worse - takes priority.

If the pilot project is successful, both law enforcement and Phoenix schools educators hope to expand it. The Phoenix schools want the technology in all of their schools. According to Arizona Schools Superintendent Tom Horne, the Phoenix schools may very well get their wish. If the project succeeds, he plans to seek funding for cameras for all schools within the state.

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