

WE SAY EDUCATION

Minority males' college success lifts all

Some of Texas' major public education institutions – including school districts, community colleges and public universities – rightly are joining forces to combat lagging college completion rates for African-American and Latino males. Their success in improving college completion rates for those student groups is the right thing to do for moral reasons, but it's also the smart thing to do for economic ones.

As the state continues a demographic shift led by a fast-growing Hispanic population, graduating more minority students becomes even more crucial to Texas' financial health. That kind of effort is sorely lacking in Texas, where nearly two of three of the state's 5 million public school students are minority. The state no longer can afford to paper over those challenges – not without putting its own prosperity at risk in the future.

The newly formed Texas Education Consortium for Male Students of Color, based at the University of Texas' Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, rightly recognizes that the effort to improve higher education for minority males needs to be addressed at every level, from public schools to college. To that point, 15 partners, including the Austin school district, along with the University of Texas, Texas A&M University, Texas State University and Austin Community College, are participating in the consortium.

Graduating more minority males means reviewing and revising disciplinary policies that remove students from school for nonsensical reasons.

A report commissioned last year by the Houston Endowment illuminated the challenges ahead. The report, which tracked all eighth-graders in Texas public schools, found that 23.9 percent of females and 16.1 percent of males went on to earn a postsecondary degree or certificate within six years of their expected high school graduation date. But black and Hispanic males lagged behind. They fared the worst of all student groups, with 7.7 of African-American males and 8.9 percent of Hispanic males earning postsecondary degrees during that same period. To address that gap, members of the consortium would operate or plan programs focused on minority males. Research shows that family background – the level of a parent's education and family income – influence a student's educational achievement. Other factors that affect student performance include the rigor of middle and

high schools, quality of teachers and parental involvement.

But there are other challenges the consortium should consider in addressing the things that detract from the academic success of minority males. One major concern comes in another recent study regarding school discipline, which showed that a majority of Texas students – particularly black and Hispanic boys – were being disciplined more than other students. The report, which tracked about a million students over a six-year period, showed that a stunning 60 percent of middle and high school students in Texas public schools were removed from the classroom for disciplinary reasons. As we noted in a July 2012 editorial, most of those students were suspended at least four times during grades seven to 12 in a pattern that carried lifetime consequences for students. And it was black and Hispanic males who were most affected.

The study by the Council of State Governments Justice Center and the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas A&M University, found that 83 percent of black males who had at least one discretionary violation; 74 percent were Hispanic males. Black females also were adversely affected with 70 percent having at least one discretionary violation. Suspensions, according to the study, were being done mostly for minor infractions,

such as being tardy for class, skipping school or violating dress codes – and not for conduct for which state law mandates suspensions and expulsions.

It's a fact that students who aren't in class miss valuable learning time and often never catch up. So it should surprise no one that only 40 percent of students disciplined 11 times or more graduated from high school during the study period, and 31 percent of students disciplined one or more times repeated their grade at least once. That situation is not only detracting from college completion by minority males but also contributing to the state's prison population and welfare rolls. Instead of expanding the tax base, it's dragging it down.

If the consortium wants to graduate more minority males from college, it will have to graduate more of them from high school. And that means reviewing and revising disciplinary policies that remove students from school for nonsensical reasons. Certainly disruptive students or those who break minor rules should be held accountable, but that can and should be done in ways that don't affect student learning or leave lifetime scars.

The challenges ahead in those areas are big but not insurmountable. We applaud the consortium for taking steps to improve college completion rates for minority males. If it succeeds, that will be a win for all of us.