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From the Los Angeles Times

## EDITORIAL

### California's dropout problem

A state senator offers a package of bills that could help keep in school some of the 150,000 kids who drop out each year.

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CALIFORNIA'S CHILDREN are abandoning school at the rate of about 150,000 a year — a number equivalent to the population of Torrance, or Irvine, or all of Imperial County. Fewer than 70% of ninth-graders statewide will graduate from high school, and in some districts the percentage drops to less than half. Shockingly, this is not particularly a problem for schools, which are ranked primarily on their test scores. If marginal students leave, it only helps their averages.

The result is a calamity in education that has almost no effect on schools, and that paradoxically has allowed schools to remain on the margins of a public debate about how to keep kids in the classroom. Fortunately, the Legislature is taking note.

The stakes are high. In Los Angeles, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa forced an awareness of the dropout crisis in a district that has coolly accepted the slide of thousands of children into failure. We can squabble about the exact percentage of students leaving schools in L.A., but more than 35,000 students disappeared from the class of 2005 between the first day of ninth grade and the last day of 12th grade. Where do they go? Too often, dropouts fall into gangs and crime. Los Angeles is the gang capital of the nation. California has the largest prison population in the country, and more than 80% of the state's prison population did not graduate from high school.

Reducing the dropout rate statewide will require a profound rethinking of how we encourage students to stay in school and how we hold schools accountable for keeping them there. State Sen. Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) has introduced a package of bills that starts that process, creating a sturdy framework for reform. The legislation, now in the Assembly, would hold schools accountable for their dropout rates and offer funding to help them engage students in the classroom, and it takes a thoughtful approach to curtailing the excessive hours some students work.

Most notably, SB 219 would add dropout rates for eighth- and ninth-graders to the Academic Performance Index. By law, 60% of the API must be devoted to test scores, but the other 40% is in play. How much the dropout rate would count toward a school's API would be determined by the state schools superintendent and board of education, but including that information would give a more realistic measure of performance. A school with high test scores but also a high dropout rate, for example, would see its API dip.

This bill would also assign API responsibility to the school and district of origin for students enrolled in alternative education programs — which is not currently the case. That would remove what Steinberg calls "a perverse incentive" for schools to stand by as the least able students walk out the door.

Another bill in the package, SB 405, would help schools in the lowest third of the API increase the number and quality of college prep and career tech courses they offer. This sounds like common sense, but it is actually a visionary attempt to eradicate the 100-year-old bias in education that allowed career tech to become a second-tier option to college readiness.

The voluntary grant program created by the bill would provide schools with \$100 a student. Schools could, for example, add a "shadow" algebra class for struggling students (shadow classes reinforce lessons previously taught in regular class) or Advanced Placement chemistry for those who excel. They could meld career tech and college prep in an "auto physics" class, like the one taught at Duarte High School.

How will this keep kids in school? A report released last year by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found that almost half of dropouts say they left school because classes were not challenging and they did not see any real-world, or work-world, applicability to what they were learning. Steinberg's SB 405 would advance what should be the ultimate goal of education: fully preparing students to perform capably whether they enter college or the work world.

Work brings us to another bill in the package, SB 406. One reason U.S. students often lag behind their international peers, research shows, is that they work outside the home more and study less. California permits 16- and 17-year-olds to work a Dickensian 48 hours a week. Steinberg's legislation would tie work to school performance. Students with lower than a C+ average and less than 90% attendance could work no more than 20 hours a week; students with a C average or lower and attendance that dips below 80% in the current semester couldn't work at all. The bill would, however, allow principals to consider extenuating circumstances, such as student and family economic necessity, and grant exemptions.

More policy work remains to be done if the dropout rate is to reverse course, but these bills set the state on the right path. They deserve the support of the Legislature and governor.

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