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Report links dropout rates to area economy

By Michael D. Hernandez / El Paso Times
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EL PASO -- Cutting the number of high-school dropouts in half in El Paso County could increase wages by about \$33 million and raise state and local tax revenues by about \$3 million, a new study shows.

The study released Wednesday by the Alliance for Excellent Education, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., looked at the economic benefits of reducing the dropout rate for the nation's 50 largest metropolitan areas. The advocacy organization works to make every child a high-school graduate.

It says that 5,504 El Paso-area students dropped out of the Class of 2008. In all, there was an average graduation rate of about 63 percent for 30 high schools within this region.

Austin-area high schools had a graduation rate of about 71 percent and Tucson schools saw about 70 percent of the students graduate, according to the study. Albuquerque-area high schools had an average graduation rate of about 49 percent.

Former West Virginia governor and Alliance for Excellent Education President Bob Wise on Wednesday called the study game-changing research. He said it provided a comprehensive picture of how reducing the number of drop outs could transform an economy.

"In these harsh economic times, increased incomes these new graduates would earn and likely spend on Main Street, plus the additional tax revenues that would go to local and state governments facing severe budget shortfalls once again demonstrates that the best economic stimulus package is a diploma," Wise said.

The

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nonprofit based its findings on 2005 graduation rates data.

It plans to release another study in January that will show how reducing dropout rates can affect spending and investment, job and economic growth as well home and auto sales in metropolitan areas.

El Paso Independent School District Superintendent Lorenzo García said high-school students in his district graduated at a higher rate than was indicated in the study. The Texas Education Agency reported that about 72 percent of students in the El Paso area graduated on time for the 2007-2008 school year.

But García agreed that sending students out into the work force with a diploma or on to college should be a priority for the community.

He said his district, the largest in El Paso, has improved graduation rates during the past several years with new initiatives that target at-risk students.

Making a bigger dent in the number of dropouts will require more money for programs and counselors, and that seems unlikely anytime soon, García said.

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As to receiving more state money, he said, "At this point, we are kind of going backwards with funding public education."

Richard Dayoub, president and CEO of the Greater El Paso Chamber of Commerce, said any study that correlates the graduation rate of a community with its economic standing is hardly an epiphany. Similar studies have been performed, he said.

What will make a difference, Dayoub said, is when students understand the value of their education and how deeply that affects their earning power.

"If we can translate that kind of information that the study produced and drill it down to where it has some meaning to the schools and to these students who are at risk, (the study) will have some value," he said.

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