

# Yes, high school dropout rates can be reduced

Businesses can help by providing financial aid and mentoring students

It's the time of the year when high school classrooms and corridors are filling up with returning and new students. It is inspiring to see the look of excitement and hope in many of their faces.

There is another group of people who are equally excited. They are the growing number of individuals and organizations committed to reducing the high school dropout rate and — taking their commitment to the next level — sending those students on to college and to better lives.

The public high school dropout rate is a human tragedy of epic proportions. Nearly one-third of all students drop out nationwide. That is a grim statistic, no way around it.

And yet there is good reason to maintain hope that we have the power to reverse this trend. More and more organizations, community leaders and businesses are beginning to recognize the problem, and many are taking steps to do something about it.

Initiatives such as Education is Freedom (EIF) and the Mayor's Intern Fellows program are showing encouraging results. Our goal is to help economically disadvantaged students graduate from high school and go on to college. We believe every young person — regardless of socioeconomic status — deserves a shot at higher education.

EIF takes a comprehensive approach to



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helping students become college-ready by providing them with academic guidance, college entrance and financial application assistance, tutoring, mentoring, professional development and life skills training. All of these work together to keep students motivated toward improving their lives. EIF has also partnered with the mayor, universities, corporations and

foundations to help its students leverage the resources to pay for college. These partners have committed more than \$15 million in scholarships for EIF students over the next five years.

Since its inception seven years ago, EIF has helped more than 3,000 high school students from the Dallas Independent School District, and 84 percent of its high school graduates have enrolled in college. That figure compares very favorably with the 43 percent of other Dallas ISD graduates and 52 percent of Texas high school graduates overall.

This year EIF is expanding its college readiness program from three Dallas ISD high schools to four, and from two middle schools to five. EIF plans to expand to 18 schools by 2012.

Working with EIF is the Mayor's Intern Fellows program, which matches juniors and seniors in prestigious internships

with corporations and nonprofit organizations. Mentoring is a key element of the intern program. It provides a positive adult influence through regular interactions with successful professionals. These corporate mentors help students see firsthand the connection between graduating from high school, going to college and getting a good and fulfilling job.

Besides giving students an up-close and personal view at what it's like to work in a business or corporate environment, the program provides networking opportunities that could lead to a job upon college graduation.

None of this success would be possible without involvement of the private sector. Many companies have joined the fight to reduce dropout rates, especially as they begin to realize the seriousness of the problem and the need for a well-trained workforce in a competitive global economy.

For example, AT&T serves as lead partner for the Mayor's Interns Fellows program. According to its 2008 Citizenship and Sustainability Report, AT&T has made the dropout problem a top corporate priority and provides the opportunity for students to job-shadow its employees nationwide — including nearly 1,500 students in Texas last year.

Businesses can help by offering financial aid, mentoring and tutoring assistance. Ultimately, it is in their long-term interests to do so.

Working together, we have shown that the dropout rate can be reduced. We can make a difference in a student's life. We can change that student's life for the better. And when we do, we all win.

**MARTIN** is CEO of Education is Freedom. **LEPPERT** is mayor of Dallas.