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PRESS CLIPPINGS

HELPING KIDS STAY IN SCHOOL

The need for numbers
Data need statewide

standardization if we

are to get a handle on
our school dropout rate

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magine how difficult it would be if
teachers used a different grading
scale for each student in each

class, each year. It would certainly
make it hard for parents to know how a
child was progressing, let alone how he
or she was doing compared to other
children. Consistency in basic docu-
mentation methods provides the foun-
dation for sound analysis, whether in a
student's report card or a business's
annual budget. Without consistency,
data have little value.

This point became painfully evident
when the Center for the Future of Ari-
zona lauchecTiEs Dropout Initiative. The
initiative was launched with the assis-
tance of a coalition of education, busi-
ness, policy and non-profit leaders who
recognize the social and economic
implications of Arizona's high dropout
rate. The coalition uncovered signifi-
cant disparities in data collection and
reporting methods throughout the state
that made it difficult to draw reliable
conclusions about educational trends.

For example, Arizona students who
finish eighth grade do not always con-
tinue on to high school. We don't know
enough about who these students are,
and they don't appear in school dropout
statistics because these calculations are
based on the number of students enter-

ing ninth grade.
Arizona's large "status unknown"
category — those students whom the
school system cannot account for — is
unacceptably high, at up to 10 percent
of students expected to graduate after
four years.
State-to-state comparisons often
rely on National Center for Education
Statistics which report the percentage
of a state's population between the ages
of 18 and 24 who hold a high school
diploma. These individuals may or may
not have attended an Arizona high
school and the statistic is not an accu-

rate reflection of the performance of
our public schools, even though it is
often interpreted as such.
Arizona's current data systems can't
track individual students, making it dif-
ficult to accuratel y describ e
graduation/dropout trends in Arizona,
one of the reasons for the high number
of students in the "status unknown"
category.
Aligning documentation methods is
a daunting task, but one the Center for
the Future of Arizona and a coalition of
community leaders are tackling. We
urge the Arizona Department of Educa-
tion to perfect its student tracking sys-
tem (Student Accountability Informa-
tion System) to reduce the number of
students in the "status unknown" cate-

gory and to better track where our

Arizona students who finish

eighth grade do not always

continue on to high school. We

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dropout statistics.

students are in the educational process.
We recommend the alignment of Ari-
zona methods for calculating high
school graduation with national stan-
dards, including the stipulation that
graduation requirements be completed
by the end of the summer of the stu-
dent's fourth year in high school and
that GEDs not be included in this calcu-

lation since they are not awarded by the
public schools. These steps will clarify
Arizona data relative to high school
graduation and dropout as well as allow

for more accurate state-to-state com-
parisons.
The Center for the Future of Arizona
works through coalition building and
consensus and our next steps will focus
on strategies for reducing dropout and
improving high school completion rates.
Preliminary work indicates that focus-
ing on preschool and school readiness;
third and fourth-grade reading and
math achievement; the eighth to ninth-
grade transition; and high school reten-
tion will be integral to any set of strate-
gies developed to improve student
achievement and school completion
rates.

Even more preliminary work indi-
cates that developing appropriate
incentive structures for schools and

even teachers, students and parents
could be productive. Achieving state-
wide consensus on an action plan to
improve high school completion and
educational attainment as we have done

in the data phase can give us a powerful
platform on which to improve student
achievement and give hope to then-
future.
We invite you to review the coali-
tion's work on the Arizona Dropout Ini-
tiative by visiting the Center's Web site
(wwwArizonaFuture.org). We also wel-
come your comments and questions at
info@ArizonaFuture.org.

Dr. Sybil Francis is executive
director of the Center for
the Future of Arizona.