OUR VIEW: A societal problem, 04-12-09

Are you worried about rising crime in Fall River?

Do you complain about having to pay high taxes, especially in the suburbs?

Have you been looking for a good, high-paying job and wish you could find one without driving to Boston?

Do you care about your community and want to see it prosper?

If you answered yes to any of the above, you ought to be embracing new efforts to curb a systemic high school dropout problem in the region and imploring town and city leaders to invest heavily in education to ensure a sustainable, prosperous future.

It’s not just about improving schools; it’s about improving communities.

The dropout rate on the SouthCoast is unacceptably high, particularly in its cities. Fall River and New Bedford are among the worst in terms of seeing students through to graduation, with average annual dropout rates of 9.4 percent and 8.5 percent, respectively. The state average is 3.5 percent. Of students entering high school in 2004, just 56 percent graduated in four years from Fall River schools; just 56.1 percent achieved the benchmark in New Bedford. During that same period, the state achieved an 81 percent rate.

Those students who leave school before receiving a diploma are obviously at a disadvantage in life. Studies show these students lose income potential throughout their careers, have a more difficult time finding a job, are more likely to be incarcerated and generally have a lower standard of living than those with higher educational attainment.

While the individual impact is significant, the societal impact of the dropout problem is much worse, affecting everyone in the SouthCoast region. It is no surprise that Fall River and New Bedford have some of the highest levels of unemployment in Massachusetts, with both closing in on 10 percent. Both cities have poverty rates higher than 40 percent, nearly triple the state average. The lack of an educated work force makes it difficult to attract companies offering high-paying jobs to the region.

The lost income potential among high school dropouts accounts for a net fiscal impact of more than $250 million a year to SouthCoast communities, according to a just-released study conducted by the Urban Initiative at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. That lost revenue — which is directly attributable to low educational attainment — leads to cuts to public safety and other critical services, an increasing burden on taxpayers and less investment in education, exacerbating the problem. The issues trickle into the suburbs, negatively impacting the entire region.

“If any one of our communities have a dropout problem, we all do,” said Edward Lambert, former Fall River mayor, head of the Urban Initiative and author of “Dropout Prevention in the SouthCoast,” a study commissioned by the SouthCoast Development Partnership urging communities to invest in themselves and their region by investing in education.

Too many take an insular view and fail to see the connection between schools and the community at large. Everything starts with education, a fact UMass Dartmouth and the partnership is trying to drive home. The university has partnered with the National Dropout Prevention Network based at Clemson University, which teaches communities how to target at-risk students and improve themselves by improving their schools. The Urban Initiative’s study offers five immediate strategies to combat the dropout problem: Expansion of mentoring and tutoring; expansion of early childhood education; greater family engagement in schools; greater focus on career and technology education; and more meaningful school-community partnerships.

The study provides a road map and the network offers communities a support system to improve education. Ultimately it is up to cities and towns to invest in their own success, which can be a tough sell in a difficult economy. But they must follow through.

“We can’t accept that this is going to continue,” said Jean MacCormack, UMass Dartmouth chancellor, of the dropout problem. “The downward spiral will continue if we don’t do this.”

Residents have to stop looking at the dropout epidemic as a school problem and recognize that it is a community problem that must be fixed. They must commit to improving and implore their representatives to invest in the future. Education is the only way.