OUR VIEW: Keep them in school

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Policy reports often group New Bedford and Fall River with cities like Brockton and Lowell, showing a pattern of older, small cities struggling with poverty, unemployment, health problems and the like. But on one vital measure — education — struggling cities around the state put SouthCoast to shame.

While differences in per capita income among the four cities are negligible at about $2,000 annually, only 56 percent of high school students in Fall River and New Bedford graduate in four years, according to a new dropout prevention study from UMass Dartmouth's Urban Initiative. In Brockton and Lowell, the rates are 73 and 74 percent, respectively.

What's so different about us?

Not only do New Bedford and Fall River have similar incomes to the comparison cities, but we have a substantially higher proportion of white students, who graduate at higher rates than black and Hispanic students statewide.

Our class sizes are similar to the comparison cities. Our per-pupil spending is similar. Our loss of manufacturing jobs is similar — 26 percent since 2001, versus 24 percent statewide.

So where does the disparity come from?

It may be low expectations. Our communities, parents and teachers must set higher expectations for urban students.

But we don't have current data on something so amorphous.

One way to try to measure expectations is through parents' educational attainment, since adults with college experience tend to know the process and encourage their children to seek higher education.

New Bedford's bachelor's degree rate was 11 percent in the last Census, an appalling statistic we have cited several times. The Urban Institute took a broader look, and what they found is revealing: Of 11 Massachusetts cities, only three had less than 30 percent of adults over age 25 with any college at all — including courses that never resulted in a degree. They were Lawrence, New Bedford and Fall River.

In fact, New Bedford and Fall River fared worse in relation to other cities on college participation than on high school dropouts.

Many of our college graduates leave the area looking for work, and the limited economic opportunities drive them out.

What they leave behind are young families in difficult circumstances. A parent may be working two low-wage jobs to make ends meet. Families may be struggling with unemployment, addiction, violence or depression. Or they may view college as unnecessary for earning a living in a trade. But more than ever, post-secondary training is essential.
Whatever the problems we face, we must find a way to keep our kids in school and send many more of them to college.

Mentoring and tutoring play a big role, and the Urban Initiative recommends expanding those opportunities. Though the report makes a number of good recommendations, some would require significant funding, such as expansion of public preschool.

Mentoring is both effective and inexpensive. It deserves maximum community support.

This morning, the Boston-based Mass Mentoring Partnership will hold a meeting for business and community leaders at UMass Dartmouth's Advanced Technology and Manufacturing Center in Fall River. SMILES Mentoring and other local groups are participating, and the event should help drum up support from local businesses to allow employees to mentor city students.

Nothing they do for the community could be more important.