

Washington Adults Urged to Step Up, So Kids Won't Drop Out **Local News**

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TACOMA, Wash. - About 18,000 students drop out and fail to graduate from high school every year in Washington. Lowering that number is the focus of a "graduation summit" being held today in Tacoma. Educators, community leaders and after-school care providers want to convince more companies and individuals to get involved in helping kids.

Erin Jones, assistant superintendent of public instruction, is one of the speakers. She says the economy is playing an enormous role in parents' ability to be involved in their kids' education.

"These parents are trying to figure out how to survive. We have parents who have two and three jobs, and we have tons of families who don't speak English, who maybe didn't grow up in this country, and they don't understand our system. I wouldn't say that parents are out of the equation; I just think we need to engage parents differently than we traditionally have."

Not all kids drop out voluntarily, says Jones. In her view, some are "pushed out" of the system and give up hope.

"Kids are sometimes unfairly punished for things, or they're expelled when really, they could be suspended. There are pieces like that, that come into kids lives that really push them out of our system and put them in a position where they have a difficult time being successful in school. "

Jones says schools can't do it all, and neither can families. She advocates a strong network of after-school programs to give teens positive role models, as well as extra help with schoolwork. She also says schools are in desperate need of volunteers, for things as simple as helping in cafeterias or listening to kids read.

Washington's high school graduation rate is almost 69 percent, a little lower than the national average. The state with the highest graduation rate is New Jersey, at 83 percent.

The Graduation Summit lasts from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. today at Evergreen State College in Tacoma.