

conversations

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MENTORS MATTER

OUR CHILDREN OUR CITY

Programs in which volunteers mentor at-risk students help lower the dropout rate

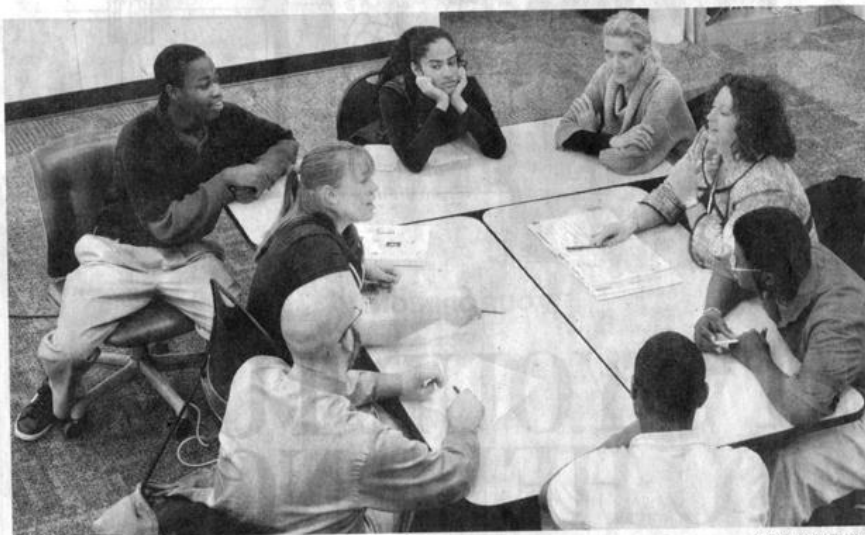
Today, The Indianapolis Star is launching a campaign called "Our Children, Our City" designed to significantly improve the academic achievement of students in Marion County. As part of the effort, which will continue for the next year and beyond, The Star hopes to inspire at least 10,000 volunteers to serve with community organizations that are making a difference in the lives of children.

The graduation rate in Marion County's 11 school districts rose 5 percent last year to 73.8 percent. Still, that leaves about one in four students without a diploma at the end of four years of high school.

A study by the Alliance for Excellent Education showed that students who dropped out in 2005 earned more than \$9,000 a year less than their peers who graduated. Besides lost wages, dropouts have higher incarceration rates and rely more on public assistance. All of these have a ripple effect on the community.

Since the Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce and other sponsors began the Common Goal initiative in 2007, with the aim of raising the graduation rate from 70 to 80 percent, schools have seen steady progress in earning a diploma. One of the reasons for success, says Chamber President Roland Dorson, is the caring adults who sign on to make a difference in young people's lives.

A statewide effort of the National Council on Educating Black Children over the past six months has involved



CHARLIE NYE / The Star

GOAL IS A DIPLOMA: Students and Common Goal mentors talk during a New Tech High session at Arsenal Technical High School Wednesday. All Tech students participate in the initiative that helps keep more than 500 students at Tech, Ben Davis, Lawrence Township Diploma Plus and Decatur Central high schools on track for graduation. Shown are (clockwise from upper left) Joseph Barnett, 16; Jasmine Rodriguez, 15; mentor Jill Hayth; mentor Christa Cassidy; Alex Winfield, 16; Devonta Washington, 15; mentor Jeremy Kosegi; and Ashley Lloyd, 16.

communities is helping increase graduation rates in 20 Indiana cities. Executive director Diana Daniels says the council's National Literacy Center pro-

gram operates seven centers in Indiana, including four in Indianapolis, that are staffed by volunteers who not only teach but lead by example.

These and other programs show that volunteer mentors who take time to work one-on-one can turn would-be dropouts into grads.

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Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce