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NEEDED: SOMEONE WHO CARES

By Roland Dorson

In 2008, more than 6,700 students dropped out of high school in the Indianapolis metropolitan area. That's 37 kids every single day during a school year. Or that's five kids every hour during the school day. Think about that: five kids an hour.

Consider that every one of those young human beings is eight times more likely to go to jail than their counterparts with high school diplomas. Each has a higher probability of being poor, unhealthy, being a young father or mother, and generally has less chance of achieving a fulfilling, meaningful life — all because of a decision made as a teenager.

Maybe you say that "life" and "fair" aren't spelled the same. People, including teenagers, have to overcome hardships and make choices. You choose to drop out; you know what you are getting into.

All right. Then consider the economic consequences for us as a community. We pay for the cost of incarceration. Think of the diminished earning power in the cost of lost opportunity. That's why former West Virginia Gov. Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, says, "The best economic stimulus package is a high school diploma."

The alliance estimates that if we had

graduated just half of the dropouts from 2008 — that's 3,450 students — they could have earned as much as \$42 million more collectively in an average year than they'd earn as dropouts. That could account for as much as \$5 million more in regional tax revenue, money that goes into local coffers instead of flowing out to support jails, prisons, poor relief, aid agencies, and on and on.



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Regardless of how you think about dropouts, this much is very clear: The kids who drop out often need someone in their lives who cares. Data show over and over again that students who have the benefit of a caring adult do better in school. When that caring adult is put in a mentoring role, academic achievement, attendance and graduation rates all increase. At the same time, negative behaviors such as drug use and crimes diminish.

In Indianapolis, we are making progress increasing the number of students who graduate from high school. Graduation rates for Marion County have increased by nearly 5 percent in the past year. One of the reasons we are gaining ground is because hundreds of people have signed on as mentors, serving as a caring adult in a young person's life.

Mentoring is just one of six in-school



CHARLIE NYE / The Star

ONE-ON-ONE: Joy Barron (right), Fishers, a Common Goal volunteer, mentors Tech High School student Christopher Davenport, 16, during a semi-monthly session.

interventions in Common Goal, a high school graduation rate initiative with major sponsors that include the Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, the Pacers Foundation, Lilly Endowment, Chase Foundation, AT&T, VEI/Community Health Network, St. Vincent Hospital and HCC Inc., and the Wal-Mart Foundation. Chamber-trained mentors work with more than 500 students at Arsenal Technical, Ben Davis, Lawrence Township Diploma Plus and Decatur Central high schools. The program is important, effective and seeking additional volunteers.

Mentors meet with students for one hour every other week in groups and discuss goal-setting, time management, career needs and more. Mentoring can

be a remarkably rewarding experience. It can break you out of your own orbit and help you see how big, challenging and remarkable the world is. You don't have to travel farther than the nearest high school. Ask mentors and they'll tell you they get just as much out the relationship as the students do.

If you care enough to take the time to read this message, I know you'd be an effective mentor. I know your time is very valuable, but believe me when I say that it's even more valuable to struggling young men or women in the community. It could determine whether they become another statistic or a success.

To learn more, visit commongoalindy.org.

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Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce