

THE GRADUATION COACH SCAM

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There is concern today about graduation rates and what to do about them. The issue is not usually addressed clearly.

If a school has a high graduation rate, such as some public—and many more private or independent—high schools do, that is not proof that the school is offering the highest quality education. Typically, graduation rates in excess of 90 percent are found in schools whose student population is economically and socially advantaged. In such schools most parents have a post-secondary academic education. Therefore, an unusually high percentage of their children would complete high school and continue beyond that to college and graduate or professional school, regardless of the schools that they attended. Frequently, when schools take credit for the academic success of such students, they are merely co-opting for their own aggrandizement the results of the native equipment with which their students came to them. Although these schools may be comparatively good, they are but a shadow of what they used to be decades ago.

In Georgia, approximately 40 percent of the students who enter high school drop out before completion. This is the acknowledged dropout rate. The rate would be higher in large urban areas, lower in the wealthier suburbs. In addition, since such figures are typically underreported and misreported—even fudged—to create a better image, one can assume that the rate is actually higher than what is openly admitted.

To address this problem, in his State of the State address, Gov. Sonny Perdue has renewed his call for placing a “completion counselor,” also sometimes labeled a “graduation specialist,” in every Georgia high school. The official name of the position, according to Georgia Department of Education guidelines, is “Graduation Coach,” a staff member whose job is described vaguely as finding potential dropouts and helping to keep them in school. In the state’s fiscal year 2007 appropriation summary, the cost of enacting this proposal for Georgia’s 385 high schools, at an annual salary for each of \$55,000, would be over 21 million dollars.

This is 21 million dollars misspent on a sham.

In a properly structured school system—one with a defined rigorous curriculum, academically competent teachers, and knowledgeable administrators—graduation coaches would be superfluous because few students would fall by the wayside and graduation completion rates would be honestly over 90 percent.

On the other hand, in a deficient school system—and I have seen this during my teaching career—graduation coaches are inefficacious. In the first place, they are often less qualified academically and professionally than even most current teachers or counselors themselves are.

When Kathy Cox—in her 2006 *Spring Bootstrap* prospectus—described who would fill these positions, she wrote that “certified counselors would be ideal,” then added that the concrete qualifications for the position were still being formulated, but “we need the best people possible in these jobs.” The key words (and catches) here are “ideal” and “possible.” As those of us who have been on the educational front lines for many years know, in our schools, the gap between the ideal (or possible) and the actual is usually an unbridgeable abyss, and what actually happens is the most evanescent simulacrum of what ought to happen. Now already, most of the positions, if not all, are being filled even in the absence of clearly defined qualifications.

Of course, it is no wonder that the position is ill defined. It would be surprising if it were defined, because it is a non-position, a phantom solution to a fabricated problem. In broad terms, it is the *responsibility* of everyone connected with students—parents and teachers alike—to spot and help potential dropouts. However, it is not one person's *job*, nor can it be.

The tacit assumption that our current crop of “certified” guidance counselors is competent flies in the face of the experience of the legion of parents (among whom I list myself) who have seen their children misadvised by them. Moreover, these are the parents with enough educational and life experience to be aware of the incompetence. Woe to those parents and their children who are not so advantaged!

In addition, in the schools in which I have seen “graduation coaches” before—in another state—the practical effect of such “coaches” was pernicious. They were manifestly under-qualified by any standard. Even worse, too often their “coaching” took the form of badgering teachers to pass students who did not deserve to pass so as to create in graduation rates a statistical boost or surge without substance.

It is time that we heeded the warning of former President Bill Clinton that we must stop graduating high school students who cannot read the diplomas that they receive. The bottom line is this. There is only one honest way to increase graduation rates: elevate student competence through curriculum reform and high performance standards delivered by academically competent teachers under the leadership of visionary scholarly administrators.

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