



Guest Column: Give adults a chance to get their high school diplomas

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In 2017, earning a high school degree is now seen as a bare minimum to compete in the workforce. According to data reported by Illinois Central College, by 2020 at least 70 percent of jobs in Illinois will require academic credentials greater than a high school diploma.

However, in Illinois state law does not allow individuals 21 and older to earn a high school degree. As proposed, House Bill 2527 would make the necessary changes so programs like Goodwill Industries of Central and Southern Indiana's Excel Center would be allowed to administer high school diplomas to adult graduates.

Excel Centers are schools that specifically cater to adult learners without high school degrees. The program began in 2010 through a partnership between Goodwill Industries and the Indianapolis Mayor's Office. Since that time, 11 schools have opened across Indiana and several more can be found in Memphis, Austin and Washington, D.C.

In these schools, classes are taught by licensed educators who focus not only on state graduation requirement courses, but also career-and-technical and dual-credit lessons. The Goodwill Excel Center program model works because the curriculum and teaching styles utilized address the particular needs of adult students. Among the number of accommodations offered include free tuition, case management and career counseling services, night classes, and day care on-site. The program's effectiveness has been supported by Ball State University researcher Michael Hicks, who found that Indiana Excel Center graduates earned \$9,330 more than individuals without a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED).

In a time of budget impasse, we are happy to report that such an amazing program will not use any state resources, but rather rely upon private donations and federal grants. Although HB 2527 calls for an initial school to be established in Rockford, a successful academic launch here could result in the expansion of Excel Centers across the state, such as in Springfield where, according to 2015 data, about 11,400 individuals in the metro area do not possess a high school degree.

This legislation comes at a crucial time. We urge the Senate to pass this life-changing bill. According to figures reported by Statistical Atlas, based on 2015 U.S. Census data, 12.7 percent of Illinois adults aged 25 and older have not earned a high school diploma. Unfortunately, the hardest hit individuals tend to be minority populations, with 14.9 percent of black females, 18.8 percent of black males, 37.5 percent of Latinas, and 39.9 percent of Latinos not possessing such credentials. The state needs to rethink certain strategies for adult education and evaluate the possibility of granting adult learners high school diplomas to close this disparity.

Individuals who do not earn a high school degree, yet want educational advancement, currently pursue a GED. Recent changes to the exam have resulted in decreasing numbers of individuals earning a GED. Despite modifications being made to accommodate the new test, in 2016, only 2,648 Illinoisans earned their GED, whereas in 2014, the number was 14,646. As this work continues, Illinois should evaluate other avenues for adult learners, such as Goodwill's Excel Centers.

We at Goodwill Industries of Northern Illinois want to thank the legislators who helped HB 2527 get this far, including state Reps. Joe Sosnowski, R-Rockford, Robert Pritchard, R-Hinckley, John Cabello, R-Machesney Park, and Litesa Wallace, D-Rockford, and state Sens. Steve Stadelman, D-Rockford, and Dave Syverson, R-Rockford, who are now tasked with moving the bill out of the Senate. We also want to thank Lt. Gov. Evelyn Sanguinetti for pushing this educational reform, and for her ongoing public support of our work and the legislation. During a news conference last month, Sanguinetti stated: "Age should not limit a person's ability to pursue an educational pathway towards success." We here at Goodwill absolutely agree.

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