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Supporting H.S. graduation an investment we all must make

GUEST
COLUMN

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For many families, high school graduation is a milestone that signifies the passage to adulthood and the path to a bright future ahead. Unfortunately there is no graduation day for millions of American students who drop out before completing their coursework.

According to a 2012 report by Civic Enterprises and funded in part by AT&T, more than 1 million students drop out of high school in the United States each year. As education experts note that the lack of a high school degree significantly worsens job prospects in today's job market, employers worry about where they will find a skilled workforce that can help them compete in today's global marketplace. As we contemplate various strategies for getting every student to graduation day, it is imperative that we also work together toward a common goal of making sure that graduates have the skills and tools they need to succeed as adults in our workforce.

AT&T is committed to supporting programs designed to help students from Providence – and around the country – graduate from high school ready for careers and college. Why? While the U.S. dropout rate has improved in recent years, the current situation poses a serious risk to American competitiveness as corporations like AT&T struggle to find talent, especially in the math and sciences fields.

The dropout rate, along with inadequate training and education, is keeping many high-paying science, technology, engineering and math jobs from being filled. And the situation is expected to worsen as STEM jobs grow a projected 17 percent by 2018. Workers in these positions typically earn 26 percent more than those in non-STEM positions. The harsh reality is that there are no openings for a high school dropout in STEM fields and their ability to find future employment is severely limited.

Just last year, we launched AT&T Aspire, a \$250 million investment in

tackling high school success, and college and career readiness for students at-risk of dropping out of high school through a much larger, "socially innovative" approach. Social innovation goes beyond traditional philanthropy to also engage people and technology to bring different approaches, new solutions and added resources to challenging social problems.

AT&T Aspire represents a \$250 million financial commitment that uses technology to connect with students in new and more effective ways, such as with interactive "gamification," Web-based content and social media. We are also tapping the most creative minds at AT&T Foundry to look for fresh or atypical approaches to educational obstacles. Finally, AT&T Aspire will leverage our significant human resources in the form of mentoring, internships and other voluntary efforts that involve our approximately 260,000 employees.

The Aspire effort already has impacted more than 1 million high school students, helping them prepare for the workplace and college.

Thankfully, the commitment to improving graduation rates is nationwide and through the leadership of the America's Promise Alliance, there is a significant effort behind ending the dropout crisis.

Here in Rhode Island, AT&T was proud to join with Providence Children and Youth Cabinet, Rhode Island Kids Count and the R.I. Department of Education at Providence Grad Nation recently to learn about what youth think could increase the high school graduation rate and improve the school climate in Providence. This is critical to identifying best practices and strategies to keeping students in school for graduation, giving them the best chance at a productive career and giving us all the opportunity to live in a nation of graduates. ■

Patricia Jacobs is the president of AT&T New England.