

# Today's high school dropouts face a bleak economic future

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CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas — After Chad Wilkins dropped out of Flour Bluff High School in 1999, he found himself in a tight financial spot.

His full-time job as a shift manager at Taco Bell was bringing in \$6.20 an hour, barely enough to make ends meet, especially since the 19-year-old had moved out of his parents' house.

When he saw an ad for a \$12-an-hour job at the Corpus Christi Army Depot, he thought his financial woes were solved. That is, until he found out he didn't meet the most basic requirement — a diploma or successful completion of the General Educational Development test.

"I just filled out the application anyway, hoping there would still be a chance," he said. "They never called me and I was like, 'Oh, well, I suppose I've got to go back to school.'"

Chad had just received a crash course in the economics of dropping out of high school.

On almost a daily basis, Meg Becker of Remedy Intelligent Staffing, a Corpus Christi temp agency, sees high school dropouts looking for work.

"For someone with no diploma or GED, the opportunity for work is minimal," she said. "If they're diligent and a good worker they might make \$6.50 or \$7 an hour."

According to 2000 U.S. Census Bureau data, the median income for a high school dropout is \$12,478, compared with \$20,889 for a high school graduate. A college degree doubles the median salary to \$40,826.

Thirty years ago, a high school diploma wasn't necessarily a prerequisite for a middle class life. With higher-paying manufacturing and factory jobs relatively plentiful, dropouts could still average \$23,000 a year (in today's dollars), according to a 1996 Brown University study.

"We are no longer in an economy where you can step into the steel mill or auto plant," said John Tyler, the Brown University profes-

sor who conducted the earnings study. "Jobs today are so much more automated, and they require more skills."

High school dropouts don't only hamper their own earning power. Too many high school dropouts can cripple a community economically by scaring off companies considering relocating there.

"For a number of companies, the very first thing they look at in a community is the number of high school dropouts," said Ron Kitchens, chief executive officer of the Corpus Christi Regional Economic Development Corp. "If you don't meet their minimum threshold, they won't look at you."

MEG BECKER,  
temp agency  
staffer

Many researchers also say earning a GED does not have the same earning power as a diploma.

"A lot of 16- and 17-year-olds feel the need to help out their families," said Clenton LaGrone, an attendance officer at Alice High School. "They're working at night, and they're too tired to go to school."

Ironically, many dropouts are forced into a lifetime of weakened earning power and poverty level wages in an attempt to escape those same economic pressures.

While 12 percent of the state's 1997 dropouts said they were leaving to get a job, according to a Texas Education Agency survey, 45 percent left because of "poor attendance," a vague reason that offers little clue as to the student's motivation. Many educators on the front lines say economic factors have more bearing than the state-sponsored survey lets on.

"Sixty-nine percent of our students work. Many live on their own," said Ricardo Almendarez, principal of Corpus Christi's Alternative High School.

And that struggle is often passed on to new generations as dropouts find themselves in the same economic quandary as their parents.

"We'd like to break out of it," LaGrone said. "But it takes a generation of not doing it to get it started. We need to get that first kid in."

Angie Martinez is hoping to stop that cycle before it reaches any of her five children. The 28-year-old mother dropped out nine years ago after bouncing among several of the high schools in Corpus Christi. She was pregnant when she left school. Since then, she has worked a number of low-paying jobs — including cleaning houses — in between pregnancies.

Her lack of job opportunities had her leaning toward returning to night school, but the final straw came when she began having trouble helping her 8-year-old son with his homework.

"My son told me he didn't want a mother who didn't graduate from high school," she said. "I wanted to help in school, but there were a lot of things I couldn't do."

Since November, Martinez has been enrolled in the Del Mar College GED program, where she attends three-hour evening classes four days a week, and hopes to pass her high school equivalency test soon.

Educators say almost all dropouts leave school without realizing the economic suicide they are committing.

"They're not in a position to look beyond the here and now," LaGrone said.

But convincing students to look at the economic implications of leaving school can be the most effective tool in combating the dropout rate, said Allan Meriwether, president and CEO of the Coastal Bend Workforce Development Board.

"The problem is they don't see the relevancy of their education," he said. "The teachers can't explain it very well. As they get older, we need to talk to kids about the reality of their situation."