

High-school dropout statistics spur East Palo Alto officials to action

By Ann Gibbons
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EAST PALO ALTO — More than 90 percent of high-school-aged youth from East Palo Alto and East Menlo Park quit high school before they graduate, a local official told visiting educators from Washington, D.C.

Only 11 of 130 students from the predominantly minority communities east of the Bayshore Freeway graduated from local high schools last year, said Warnell Coats, program coordinator of the East Palo Alto Youth Service Program.

A high school district survey currently underway indicates the

dropout rate is about 50 percent. The statistics are "frightening," Coats told staff and executive board members of Youthwork Inc. Thursday. The visitors were touring the Youth Service Program located in the former Ravenswood High School site.

Youthwork Inc., a non-profit corporation, oversees youth-education and job-training programs funded by the U.S. Department of Labor.

The problem is of such a magnitude that the East Palo Alto Municipal Council voted Monday night to hold a community forum on the subject on Monday, June 23, for parents, high school students, and

community officials to attend. "Not a day passes that I don't get phone calls from parents of ninth grade students who have been expelled," said Councilwoman Gertrude Wilks. "It spells bankruptcy and total destruction when you have a generation of kids that can't read and write."

Coats' unofficial statistics appear to conflict with the preliminary results of a recent survey taken by the Sequoia Union High School District.

Alan Gruman, the district's director of research, is working on a study of 312 students from the Ravenswood City Elementary School District, which serves the

eastern Menlo Park and East Palo Alto communities.

Gruman's preliminary results show that nearly 50 percent of those from that district either have or probably will graduate.

More than 33 percent of the students have transferred to other schools.

But, regardless of the exact number, the dropout rate is still significant, dooming many of these youths to temporary jobs if they can find any work at all, Coats said. And, when they cannot find work, they have to make money somehow — legal or illegal — to make ends meet.

That is why the East Palo Alto

Municipal Council founded the Youth Service Program four years ago to educate, counsel and find jobs for these youth. The idea is to make the teen-agers productive and to reduce crime in the area by keeping them busy, Coats said.

Last year, the federally funded program placed 105 students, aged 16 to 22, in unsubsidized jobs and granted 32 of them a General Education Development Certificate — the adult-education equivalent of a high school diploma.

This year, increased funding from Youthwork Inc. should almost double the number of students the program works with. East Palo Alto's program received

\$410,000 — one of 19 new projects chosen from 778 proposals nationwide to receive financial backing.

The increased funding will allow the center to work with "high risk" younger teen-agers, helping them before they get into trouble, Coats said.

These students will be given on-the-job training in local businesses and also will be enrolled in an accredited "back-to-basics" educational program at the Youth Service Program center at Ravenswood High School.

While the program is a lifesaver for many youths, it is taking on a job the high schools should be per-

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Times Trib. May 20, 1980

...If they could somehow arrange ...
...to get Jarvis on television every ...
...night so that everyone could see ...
...it means ... a variety ...
...the voters believe ... him calling his opponents up and ...
...one crack of doom if ... basic govern ... nt programs and ...
...tion 9 wins. But they do ... down the state dummies, he could ...
...then get his share of credit for ... social services they like and ...
...need."

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forming — job and academic counseling, said members of Youthwork Inc. who were shocked with the dropout statistics.

"The onus falls on local school educators for not being able to adequately counsel or encourage students," said Alex Delgado, executive board member of Youthworks. Delgado, who also is a Professor in Medical Sociology at the Metropolitan State College in Denver, Colo., was himself a high school dropout until he reached his 30s and went back to school.

Some parents and students attending the meeting blamed the dropout rate on lack of encouragement from administrators who they said funnel minority

students into elective and physical education classes. They tell the youths that low grades in heavy academic courses are not important during a freshman year, critics said.

Then, when the teen-ager is a junior, he finds he still has to take several years of academic courses, so he drops out rather than face the load.

"They say ninth grade is not important," said Elizabeth Barker, a mother of a high school student. "That's like telling you the first three months of your pregnancy don't count."

When another member of the Youthworks executive board asked if parents and community members were supportive of the Youth Service Program, a student enrolled in the program answered.

"When I told my mother I got a 53 on my social studies test, she gave me a big kiss and \$5," said Vincent Johnson, aged 19.