

Jim Cowden's Column: **Staying in school has many rewards**

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Some years ago, my neighbor and best friend dropped out of high school and started working full-time on a farm. Several years later, he began to work as a garbage hauler. He drove the truck and had another person along to pick-up the bags and cans.

I completed high school and earned a bachelor of science degree. Although I had experience working a number of jobs, I chose to teach vocational agriculture at the high school level. I started my new job making less than \$10,000 annually.

One afternoon I was walking down the road near my old home and my neighbor stopped to chat. He asked what I was doing now, which I proudly said teaching high school agriculture. He asked how much I was being paid and then laughed at my answer. He was making twice what I was, and he enjoyed his job of driving a garbage truck. It left my ego deflated and didn't seem fair.

There are many success stories whereby people have left public education to enter the workforce. Many earned good wages that could support their families. They took trainings by the company to advance within that same company. These folks were loyal, hard working and smart.

Through the years we've seen a change take place. The jobs at the local manufacturing plants have begun to dwindle. Many folks, some of whom are family, friends or neighbors have lost their jobs.

More jobs than ever before now require a minimum of a high school education or its equivalent. Unemployed workers that do not have an adult high school diploma or GED may find themselves unable to find comparable employment. Some have enrolled in courses to be retrained or retooled for other job fields. Locally, Rowan Cabarrus Community College has stepped-up to provide this education and training.

Education is as important today, if not more important than it ever was. Our schools are under pressure to meet federal guidelines that all children will achieve success in our schools. One concern that schools share is the dropout rate of their students.

The Rowan-Salisbury School System got good news last week when the North Carolina Public Schools released the annual dropout event report. The rate for the 2005-06 school year was 4.37 percent. Compared to a five year rate (1999-2004) of 5.58 percent, this truly is an improvement. But, as it has been said by a number of folks, we can't rest on our laurels.

The Rowan Partners for Education, who are advocates for public education, have established a decrease the dropout rate committee. This committee works with the Rowan Salisbury Schools to consider ways we can work together on this issue.

There is no magic cure for reducing the dropout rate, nor is there any one reason one can point to why a child will dropout of school.

It takes the combined efforts of students, parents, teachers, administration and community to have kids stay in school.

Each school in Rowan County is presently utilizing many great strategies to reduce the dropout rate. Teachers play a huge role in this endeavor through advisement, collaboration, one-on-one counseling and tutoring.

They also use early identification of at-risk students beginning at the elementary level.

The North Carolina Cooperative Extension 4-H and Youth Development Program recently developed a blueprint for the future. They too are working on the same relevant issues. The key for youth to be successful in the future is based on them preparing for employment, educational excellence and nurturing healthy lifestyles.

Rowan County also has a biotechnology task force that is looking at expanding career technical education into the agriculture and medical sciences technology fields.

Will there be biotech jobs in the future? This would be a safe assumption, with the North Carolina Research Campus being built in Kannapolis and the Research Triangle that reaches to Raleigh.

Just as career technical education has kept many students enrolled in school, expansion in the biotechnology course of study should cause a great deal of excitement.

We all have a role to help students stay in school and get an education. The teachers do a super job! I haven't met a teacher who didn't care about each and every one of their students, but they need our support to get the job done.

Talk to the administrators or teachers in a school near your area-even if you don't have children in that school.

There are many opportunities to volunteer and make a difference in a child's future.

James Cowden is the County Extension Director in Salisbury.