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City Program Helps Thousands Finish High School

DIAL UP BROAD BAND

January 14, 2008

Mayor Michael Bloomberg, joined by Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, announced Monday that the city's "learning to work" program will graduate its 5,000th student later this month.

The program was set up in September 2005 to help students who are academically behind by at least two years or those who've previously dropped out of high school. It enables them to work toward their diplomas, while also working at a paid internship.

"There are 140,000 New Yorkers between the ages of 16 and 21 who are either dropped out or on their way to dropping out and we needed different strategies to reengage them," said Klein.

"Some kids don't want to go to college and college is wrong for them," he said. "We need to then make sure they get the kind of attention they need to pursue the careers that they want to."

This attention is what one soon-to-graduate student said was the key for him.

"Counselors will not allow students to fail classes or cut school without immediately getting the students' parents involved," said student Kevin Heath.

Currently only five in ten city kids graduate from high school on time. But the official in charge of cutting the drop-out rate says with 10,000 students who were once at-risk kids now in new alternative-education programs, the tide is slowly turning.

"We're bringing more students back and bringing them to graduation," said JoEllen Lynch of the DOE.

A Roman-Catholic nun whose non-profit organization

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has long tackled the drop-out problem says the mayor deserves credit for making at-risk kids a priority.

"All eyes are on these 135,000-14,000 young people who aren't making it," said Sister Paulette LoMonaco of Good Shepherd Services. "They haven't disappeared and they shone a spotlight on these kids to say 'let's make it better.'"

The mayor was asked by a student in the audience what the city was doing to make sure more at-risk students were getting the word that programs were available for them. Jason Pizarro, who's about to graduate and plans on taking the SATs in May, says he doesn't want other kids to drop out like he almost did.

"There's lot of kids falling behind," said Pizarro. "Once you see you become a bad student, you lose hope."

Klein agrees more publicity is needed.

The city asks any drop-outs who are interested in getting back to school to call 311.

- Michael Meenan

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