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LB 868

the dropouts in 2001-2002 in the counties of Nebraska. And you will see that the total was 4,028, 4,028 young people who left our schools, who have a future that does not hold much hope, because in fact, the U.S. Department of Labor tells us that high school dropouts participate in the labor force at a rate of 76 percent, as opposed to high school graduates, who are in...or excuse me, high school dropouts who are in the workforce at 61 percent, as opposed to high school graduates who are in the work force at 77 percent. When the economy falls and people start filling the unemployment lines, the first to go are those who are in the workforce with less education. And it's even worse than those averages, because in fact, if you look at a breakdown, you find that from the ages of 20 to 24, high school dropouts participate in the work force at the rate of 70 percent; but if they are 25 and over, only 43 percent of high school dropouts have full-time employment. Maybe their backs give out, or maybe they've just given up hope of getting ahead. There was an article just last night in the Omaha World-Herald, I've also distributed that to you, talking about the dropout rate in the Omaha Public Schools for minority children and for poor children: 47.9 percent of minorities, and 50.8 percent of poor, and the overall graduation rate is only 54.3 percent. I would submit to you that that's too many children to lose in the state of Nebraska, too many children to sideline because in fact they don't have the skills to survive in our technological society. Children who have no hope of going on for further training in our technical schools, our community colleges, our state colleges, because in fact they made a choice at age 16 that they cannot take back. Oh, it's true they can go and they can sign up for a GED course. But that's difficult too, because as an adult they may have other dependents, they may have other situations, and they have no parents to pay the bills, to feed and clothe them while they go to school. That's not always an option. What we are submitting to you in LB 868 is not a mandatory attendance of school at age 18, because in fact we're offering them a choice. You can leave before you're 18 if in fact you earn your high school diploma, study hard, get out of there fast, or get an equivalent degree, a GED, or if in fact you can talk your parents into signing a waiver. And if your parents say it's all right, we're going to let you drop out. I'd rather not do that. But I think it's a good middle ground.