

Failing schools...swelling jails

Written by Judge Greg Mathis
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I recently visited two high schools and two correctional facilities. At the high schools, I observed that students are, despite what many believe about today's young people, eager to learn and want to succeed. I wonder why this desire our children have to do well oftentimes turns into complacency, leading them down a path of self-destruction. After all, a child is born with a clean mind, clean hands and a pure heart. What happens to make these once innocent, open young people turn toward a life of violence and crime?

We can only blame ourselves. The things we put into – or do not put into - their minds ultimately determine what our children become. As we see more and more young people drop out of school and end up trapped in the criminal justice system, we cannot continue to blame them. We are failing them.

A college graduate earns substantially more money over the course of their lifetime than a high school graduate and is able to be more competitive in the job market. Yet, prison spending outpaces education spending in several states in this country. Vermont, Michigan, Oregon, Connecticut and Delaware spend more on building new prisons than they do on education. It seems as if the priority of this country is not to provide a pathway toward self-sufficiency by opening up the doors to education. Rather, we seem to intentionally steer those at risk toward the prison industrial complex.

It costs nearly \$50,000 to imprison an adult for a year. A four-year degree at Michigan State University costs approximately \$48,000. Knowing what a college degree can add to a person's life and how it impacts their contributions to society, it is clear that it far more cost effective for us to focus on education and not on incarceration. But we continue to build prisons and we continue to jail people, more than any other industrialized country.

Approximately 7.3 million Americans are in prison, on parole or probation, costing taxpayers nearly \$50 billion. An overwhelming number these individuals are high school dropouts who are functionally illiterate. Upon their release, they find themselves uneducated and unemployable and are oftentimes forced back into the life that led them to prison in the first place. Our lack of attention on education has created a cycle that, if we do not break, will ensure America will have a far less diverse and active workforce in coming decades, putting our economy at risk.

All young people should know that, through our efforts and actions, we believe in their potential. Spending more on prisons than schools does not show our young people we want them to succeed. Improving schools and teachers, making schools safe and providing higher education opportunities for even the poorest students does. It is critical that we capture, hone and direct the energy our young students demonstrate early on. When we focus on education, on providing opportunities, we all win.

Judge Greg Mathis became the youngest judge in Michigan's history and was elected a Superior Court Judge for Michigan's 36th District. He has been called upon as a regular contributor to national television programs, including "Larry King Live," "Politically Incorrect," CNN's "Talk Back Live," "Showbiz Tonight" and "Extra" to discuss his opinions on complex issues of the day, such as national security, unique sentencing, affirmative action and celebrity scandals. He also offers his take on high-profile legal cases.