

## **4-YEAR NBHS GRADUATION RATES AT 5-YEAR LOW**

**The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education recently released the 4-year graduation rates from 2006 to 2010 for all School Districts in the Commonwealth.**

**It was disappointing to learn that despite the many efforts of the New Bedford School Department and various community organizations, the combined 4-year high school graduation rates for New Bedford High School and its Alternative High School dropped from a recent high of 58.2% in 2007 to a low of 53.5% in 2010.**

**New Bedford's high school graduation rate of 53.5% was well below the average of 9 other Gateway Cities, which was 62%. This was despite the fact that many of the other Gateway Cities have more challenging demographics. In these cities, the percentage of low income students was 77% on average versus 71% in New Bedford. The percentage of minority students was 71% versus 48% in New Bedford; and the percentage of students whose first language was not English was 42% versus 21% in New Bedford.**

**One encouraging factor is that in recent years, New Bedford High School has convinced many students, who did not meet the graduation requirements after 4 years, to enroll for a 5<sup>th</sup> year of high school. While we don't yet have the most recent 5-year high school graduation rates, this effort has increased the overall New Bedford High School graduation rates in recent years by 3.1% to 5.6%.**

**Nevertheless, the problem with very low high school graduation rates either on a 4-year or 5-year basis is that in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the reality is that students who drop out of high school will have a much harder time finding a job. Also, the types of jobs they can qualify for in most cases will not pay a living wage and may be less than challenging.**

**Low high school and college graduation rates have many adverse consequences for the City of New Bedford and its residents. Recent data indicates that out of the 351 cities and towns across the State, New Bedford's median household income is the 3<sup>rd</sup> lowest. New Bedford's unemployment rate is currently 14%, which is the second highest in the State for cities of 50,000 or more. And, according to a house-to-house survey in 2005, 53% of 16 – 21-year-olds who had dropped out of New Bedford High School during the prior 5 years were unemployed.**

**Moreover, a college education or a trade school education is in every child's best interest.**

**We are now in a knowledge-intensive economy or what some call a *neck-up economy*. To obtain a good paying job in this new economy, one needs a college education or some other form of post-secondary training. If a student enrolls in college and graduates from college or a trade school, he or she will have an easier time getting a job. The job will most likely be more challenging. Also, the pay will likely be quite good and enable the graduates to enjoy a nice standard of living. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, starting pay for most 4-year college graduates currently ranges from \$30,000 to \$60,000 per year depending on their field of specialty. Trade School graduates in some fields also earn excellent wages. On average, a college or trade school graduate in some fields will likely earn \$2 to \$6 million more over a lifetime than a high school dropout, depending on their profession.**

**The New Bedford School Department and community organizations must boost efforts and programs that will inspire more children to take school seriously; do well academically; graduate from high school; and enroll in college or a trade school.**

**We are encouraged by some of the new initiatives planned by Superintendent of Schools Dr. Mary Louise Francis, which should over time significantly increase the high school graduation rate. These include: radically improving the way education is delivered in the classrooms; identifying at-risk students early on in the elementary schools and giving them the extra help they need to succeed in the classroom; offering free schooling to high school dropouts regardless of their age so as to encourage them to graduate or earn a GED; and converting part of the High School to an Innovation School. We support expansion of successful pilot initiatives such as these so that the NBSD can rise to its highest potential.**

**The New Bedford School Department should implement a Performance-Based Compensation System for key personnel as an incentive to improve. For example, schools that are significantly out-performing other Gateway Cities on the MCAS tests should offer Principals, Key Staff and Teachers extra monetary rewards for their successful efforts. Conversely, the leaders of under-performing schools that don't improve over a reasonable period of time should be held accountable.**

**In summary, when one student drops out of high school, it's a human tragedy. When over 40% drop out, it's a civic tragedy because knowledge-based industries will be reluctant to relocate to our community to offer our residents well-paying jobs. Thus, the low graduation rates are not just a school problem but a community problem; we all need to do our part to improve educational attainment in New Bedford.**

**By Craig Dutra of the Community Foundation of Southeastern Massachusetts and Tom Davis of the Greater New Bedford Industrial Foundation on behalf of the New Bedford Education Roundtable, a broad group of community leaders dedicated to improving schools in New Bedford.**