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TODAY'S EDITORIAL

Dropout bill deserves a chance

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Our position: *Senators should approve this latest effort to stem the state's high dropout rates.*

Before dismissing the proposals contained in House Bill 1347, which aims to stem high school dropout rates, keep the number 23,100 in mind. That is the number of eighth-graders from the original Class of 2005 who likely left school without a diploma.

Most will be unemployed or chronically underemployed. Many will end up on welfare and work odd jobs to support themselves and their families. The decline in traditional manufacturing means fewer opportunities for steady work. They will eventually make up most of the prison population.

Much of their failure to graduate is a consequence of the state's stubborn culture of low educational achievement, under which little importance is given to finishing high school -- and eventually college. Reversing that notion is the laudable goal of HB 1347, which will be considered on Wednesday by the Senate Education Committee.

Limiting the excuses high school students can use for dropping out to illness and financial hardship, a linchpin of the bill, builds on efforts made last year to raise the dropout age from 16 to 18 and deny work permits and driver's licenses to dropouts. Restricting truants from public places during school hours is also key to better school attendance.

As envisioned by state Rep. Luke Messer, R-Shelbyville, who co-authored the bill with the help of state Higher Education Commissioner Stan Jones, there would also be incentives for at-risk students to stay in school. A dropout or even a student bored by traditional high school could attend Ivy Tech or Vincennes University to earn a high school diploma and an associate degree at the same time. Encouraging colleges to team up with urban schools and offer dual-credit courses for free to poor students extends the kind of opportunities available mostly in suburban schools.

Imagine what a carrot-and-stick approach could mean for the educational and economic destinies of Indiana's poorest students: An Arsenal Tech student graduating with both a diploma and enough credits to finish college early.

Passing HB 1347 alone won't reduce the state's woeful graduation rate or save the 23,100 who didn't finish school. But it would go a long way in helping those kids faltering right now, and in raising the educational expectations of Indiana's children.