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## Education must be first

For northeastern Louisiana to have a promising economic future, more of our people must be educated.

As simplistic as that statement may sound, it's a challenge we have not been able to conquer.

Efforts have been made to change the outcomes, to ensure that more children are educated. School accountability, which includes scoring on dropout rates, is well established.

High school redesign, a move intended to meet the needs of the non-college bound student, is now in place. Local training programs, designed to meet business' needs, also are established.

Yet, more than one-third of Louisiana's students don't complete high school. And of those who do, only 15 out of 100 complete an advanced training program or degree.

That is not the level of educational attainment we must have to attract and retain jobs in northeastern Louisiana. It also is apparent that government alone, including the state's educational system, cannot solve our school dropout problems.

State and local education leaders and volunteer organizations will meet at the Baton Rouge River Center on Tuesday to begin drafting a plan for decreasing the dropout rate. Promoters of the "Louisiana's Promise" summit say the work done there will stimulate local school systems and community leaders to develop their own plans to address the problem.

"It's a serious problem," said John Warner Smith, chief executive officer of Education's Next Horizon, a statewide volunteer group working with the Department of Education. "The good news is that it's solvable. There are strategies that work. These are not problems that can't be fixed."

Focusing on local initiatives that improve educational outcomes will be essential for northeastern Louisiana's future. Community leaders, volunteer groups and churches must become involved at neighborhood levels to close the gap.

A 65 percent graduation rate isn't good enough for jobs of the future. Preparing 15 out of 100 adults for available jobs won't begin to lift this region out of poverty.

It's an issue that should concern us all.

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