LETTERS

Plugging the prison pipeline

Juvenile males

You look at the evening news and get disgusted that there is no real news. There are small robberies and shootings and drug busts. These are what news stations use when they have no significant news to report. These time-fillers are called police blotters.

When you think again about it, most of those perpetrators are males — most of them minority males — and most of them are dropouts, with many of them joining gangs because they need somebody to accept them. We don’t need to switch channels — we need to do something about the source of these young men.

Rather than simply reacting to juveniles behind bars, Harris County must look at the factors that produce these youngsters — parents and schools — and we need to develop programs to stop the flow from schools to jails. Nearly six in 10 students in Texas public schools were suspended or expelled at least once between seventh and 12th grade. Only 1 percent of these offenses were worth jail time. But our overworked teachers have neither the time nor the ability to deal in constructive discussions about a student’s behavior. So the logical consequence is immediate separation from classroom and students. Most students never make up the lost time. Most of the juvenile detention and the youth crime begins there, not in the streets.

So what can Houston do about it?

We can consider the work of juvenile court Judge Stephen Teske of Clayton County, Ga., who has sought to reform the juvenile justice system by deinstitutionalizing low-level juvenile delinquency and simple misbehavior. His initiatives, which aim to resolve the root causes of delinquent behavior, have been used in Georgia, Alabama, California, Maryland, Louisiana, Kansas and several other states. The system reforms involve positive education, social service organizations, clergy and law enforcement.

 Teske’s initiatives have an astounding record. Authorities report they’ve seen 73 percent fewer criminal charges, 69 percent fewer juvenile complaints and a 24 percent increase in graduation rates, as well as a closer coalition between these “stakeholder” groups.

 He’ll be in Houston next week to lead a town hall meeting to teach us how to reduce our detentions and arrests and increase graduation rates.

 The meeting, convened by the United Way of Greater Houston, is scheduled for 8:30 to 11:30 a.m. Monday. It will be held at the United Way Center, 50 Waugh Drive. and is open to law enforcement, educators and the media.

 We need to hear what other states are doing about slowing the flow of young people into the justice system, and keeping them in school to ensure a future with positive returns — a future full of hope.

Anna Rubin, Jacob Fioretti, Samuel Kaeff and William “Bill” Leonson