



Hattiesburg Area

Dropout Prevention Summit

Summary Report

October 1, 2008



The Crisis at Hand: Why We're Here

In the midst of the current economic and financial meltdown gripping our nation, an even larger crisis looms on the horizon: a persistently high dropout rate that increases the threat to the nation's strength and prosperity. According to one recent study, only half of the high school students in the country's 50 largest cities are graduating in four years. The study, released earlier this year by America's Promise Alliance, found an average graduation rate in these cities of 52%, with a figure as low as 25% in Detroit.¹

The United States can no longer absorb the costs and losses associated with an education system that produces 1.2 million dropouts every year. While the dropouts themselves suffer the most direct impact, the economy, social fabric, and security of the nation, states, and local communities are also affected. Consider the following:²

- Over the course of his or her lifetime, a single high school dropout costs the nation approximately \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity. If the students who dropped out of the Class of 2008 had graduated, the nation's economy would have benefited from an additional \$319 billion in income over their lifetimes.
- High school dropouts are far more likely than graduates to be arrested or incarcerated. Increasing the high school graduation rate and college matriculation for male students by only 5% would lead to a combined savings and revenue of almost \$8 billion annually.
- Each student who graduates from high school will save states an average of \$13,706 in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured care over the course of his or her lifetime.
- For every \$500 of wealth that households headed by a high school dropout accumulate, households headed by high school graduates possess approximately \$5,000. This translates into an additional \$74 billion in collective wealth in the United States if every household were headed by an individual with at least a high school diploma.

In Mississippi, the current high school dropout rate is 15.9%. It is estimated that 14,000 Mississippi high school students drop out every year. This translates into over 50 students each school day. Nearly 168,000 high school dropouts are on Medicaid in Mississippi, costing the state more than \$208 million annually. High school dropouts account for 75% of inmates in state prisons and 69% of local jail inmates.

Area school district graduation data have been summarized in Appendix A to this report.³

Individuals who fail to earn a high school diploma are at a great disadvantage, and not only when it comes to finding good-paying jobs. They are also generally less healthy and die earlier, are more likely to become parents when very young, are more at risk of tangling with the criminal justice system, and are more likely to need social welfare assistance. Even more tragic, their children are more likely to become high school dropouts themselves. In fact, according to a recent paper published by The Education Trust, the United States is the only industrialized country in the world in which today's young people are less likely than their parents to have completed high school.⁴ Reversing this trend will be a key element to breaking the bondage of poverty.

Summary

The Mississippi Department of Education's (MDE) Office of Dropout Prevention convened two summits in early 2008 in an effort to reduce the high school dropout rate in the state. Called "Destination Graduation," the student summit was held on January 15 and the adult summit was convened on February 28. Nearly 3,000 people from around the state attended the two summits held in Jackson.

In several focus groups at the adult summit on February 28, several individuals pointed out the need to raise greater awareness of the impact of the high school dropout issue and its impact on our area. United Way of Southeast Mississippi, in concert with local school districts in Forrest, Jones, Lamar, and Perry Counties, convened the Hattiesburg Area Dropout Prevention Summit on October 1. The summit provided a forum for discussion and brainstorming among key community stakeholders, including students, school teachers and administrators, and community leaders representing area businesses, congregations, and civic groups.

Those attending the summit were divided into workshops to discuss and answer a series of driving questions initially developed by MDE's Office of Dropout Prevention. This report identifies key themes that emerged from the workshops and is patterned after the report on the adult summit held in Jackson in February.⁵ A more detailed listing of the themes is provided following the narrative.



Impact of Dropouts on the Community

Participants expressed the notion that a highly functional society cannot continue with a growing dropout problem. It was expressed and understood that dropouts negatively impact the social and economic quality of the community. As dropouts earn significantly lower wages, they have fewer dollars to turn over in other sectors of the economy.

A dropout problem that stems in part from a breakdown in the family unit increases the economic and personal burden on all of society. Participants cited the statement from MDOC Commissioner Chris Epps that third-grade test scores are a predictor of the need for state prison space.

It was noted that dropping out does not just suddenly happen in high school. The seeds are planted in elementary school. Participants stated that the purpose of education is to make students competitive in the modern economy and that dropouts will not have the competitive advantage in the future. In effect, dropping out creates a barrier for future hope and opportunity.

Issue Awareness, Perception, and Tracking

Summit participants were generally aware of the numbers involved in the dropout problem and the problem was defined as "real" rather than just "perceived". Workshop participants noted repeatedly that the number of dropouts is "too high". Most participants had no problem identifying the perceived at-risk student. However, it is important to note that participants also cited dropping out as a problem among more affluent households and that dropouts are found across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Several participants cited the phrase: "It takes a village to raise a child." They expressed the notion that every segment of the community must play a leadership role in resolving the

problem of dropouts. In one workshop, participants noted the issue of “dropouts in waiting” – students who have mentally dropped out at an early age and are just “marking time” until they can legally leave school. We are targeting high school students when, in fact, the focus should be shifted to much younger students who are at risk of dropping out.



Participants noted the perception that students are bored. Courses are not challenging enough and emphasis is placed on preparation for college rather than on occupational or vocational success as an adult. In one workshop, for example, it was noted that some students have no aspirations for college and are not being given alternative routes to success in life. Further, once students have missed school days or classes, there is no chance to recover in the school system and failure feeds upon itself.

Community Resources – Availability and Gaps

Workshop participants had little difficulty citing numerous community resources that could be used in dropout prevention efforts. However, it is apparent that gaps remain, not only in the type and amount of resources, but in focusing and coordinating the available resources to effectively combat the dropout problem.

Interestingly, many of the same organizations showed up in the participants’ lists of both resources and gaps. Local colleges and universities, for example, were listed as resources for solving the dropout problem. However,

more involvement in student development on the part of institutions of higher learning was cited as a gap. Many noted that a large volunteer base is available in the community to support school programs, but the various volunteer groups are not organized or trained to help in the schools.

In one workshop, participants noted that some students are actually the adult figure in their home and, therefore, do not want to be treated like a child at school. Many noted the need for more support for parents and grandparents who need more help raising their children and grandchildren. In general terms, more family support was cited as a need in several workshops.

Galvanizing and Organizing the Community

Workshop participants were nearly unanimous in their support of the entire community getting involved in attacking the dropout problem. Many felt that our communities already have a wealth of resources, but that the resources are not being focused on the dropout problem. One workshop noted that we simply need to ask.

The greatest perceived barriers to making the dropout problem a priority in our communities are the lack of perceived personal impact and the competition for attention among competing priorities. Greater long-term public awareness of the problem communicated across all segments of the population was seen as the biggest need in raising the dropout problem to a higher level or priority in the public’s mind.



Next Steps

One workshop suggested making dropout prevention an endless program of checking on our schools and our students – “like checking the oil in your car.” See the thematic analysis for a listing of the suggestions of the participants.

Emerging Issues

See the thematic analysis for a listing of the additional issues identified by the summit participants.

Conclusion

Participants noted that this summit was an important step in raising awareness of the dropout problem facing us. The level of awareness was raised even among those in

attendance at the summit. The consensus appeared to be that all segments of all our communities need to move forward in concert to attack the problem. As a report from the National Dropout Prevention Center noted: “Schools can no longer be islands in communities with no bridges to the mainland. Bridges must be built to connect schools, homes, and communities.”⁶

One significant conclusion of the adult summit held in Jackson earlier in the year was also found in the Hattiesburg area summit:

“Summit participants recognized that a solution to the dropout problem will require broad-based collaboration from various community constituencies, including not only educators but also employers, religious leaders, parents, political and civic leaders, and citizens, including students themselves.”⁷



Thematic Analysis of Workshop Discussions

Perceived Community Impacts of High School Dropouts

Quality of Life Outcomes – compromised well-being of community and residents

- Lack of mentors available for next generation
- Overall increase in violence and crime
- Increase in domestic violence
- Dropouts make poor parents
- Higher rate of teen pregnancy
- Dropouts make poor neighbors
- Increase in the use of drugs
- Greater instances of gang-related activities
- Loss of hope among dropouts
- Lower self-esteem among dropouts
- Higher levels of illiteracy

Economic Impact – unemployment and adverse economic consequences

- Fewer good jobs available to dropouts
- Available jobs often do not have any benefits
- Dropouts earn lower wages
- Fewer qualified workers for available jobs
- Decline in the number of taxpayers
 - o Greater tax burden on businesses
 - o Greater burden on remaining taxpayers
- Inability to maintain “what we have now”
- Lower level of home ownership
- Fewer school teachers needed
- Decline in banking business
- Lower levels of home ownership



- Inability to properly or adequately maintain homes, leading to lower home values
- Fewer credit-based transactions for dropouts
- No work history because dropouts don't stay at any one job for long
- Greater demand on public transportation
- Greater dependency on social services
- Lack of work ethic in general
- Dropouts create a burden on the health care system
- Dropouts have greater mental health needs

Personal Impact – adverse impact on individuals throughout the community

- Fear of failure on the part of students
- Alienation of the dropouts and isolation from others in society
- Increase in crime affects safety of homeowners

Other Perceived Impacts

- Dropouts worry about surviving today, not getting ahead tomorrow
- Dropouts drop out of everything, not just school
- Dropouts do not feel they are part of the community
- “Domino Effect” – more dropouts lead to more dropouts
- Dropouts have no understanding of how business or government function
- Dropouts make uninformed and unproductive citizens

Issue Awareness, Perception, and Tracking



Awareness – participant awareness of the dropout problem

- Participants were aware of the numbers
- The numbers are “too high”
- Participants cited awareness of overall high school dropout numbers, but not of specific district data

Perception – participant knowledge vs. perception of the problem

- Participants stated the problem is real, not just perceived
- Higher instances of dropouts among:
 - o Pregnant teenagers
 - o Substance users and abusers
 - o Struggling students who have been left out
 - o Teens with no “home life”
- The “fast life” is more appealing and is more valued than education
- Participants noted lack of parental support among dropouts
- Students have “mentally” dropped out at an early age and are just waiting until it’s legal to physically drop out
- Average student gets no positive reinforcement
- Too much emphasis on college preparation instead of adult success
- Students give up because they cannot fulfill the requirements for graduation
- Students are not challenged in school – they are bored
- There is no chance to recover once school credits are missed or if a student is absent too many days
- Students from affluent families are starting to be part of the dropout problem – it is not just students from poor households
- Students who are not involved in extracurricular activities have a higher dropout rate

Tracking – monitoring and evaluating the dropout problem

- Data must be available – it’s “out there”
- National and state websites with data we need
- Summits are a vehicle for collecting and disseminating data
- Every school district has a dropout coordinator and committee to monitor the problem
- Agencies track data on contributing factors, including drug abuse, teen pregnancy rates
- Youth agencies track their members (Big Brothers/Big Sisters and Boys and Girls Club, for example)
- Mississippi Department of Education tracks and evaluates data



Leadership – defining leadership in responding to the problem

- “It takes a village” and the whole village has to lead
- Several participants cited the need for mentoring programs to demonstrate leadership skills to students
- Need for more male leadership role models in the schools
- Need for mentors for every child
- Local schools need to spend more time leading
- Community-based after-school programs
- School counselors working with parents
- Parents need to know more about school curriculum being taught
- Involvement of churches
- Need an “early alert system” to show where the needs are greatest



Community Resources – Availability and Gaps

Resources – what is available in the community

- State Superintendent’s involvement and commitment
- School dropout prevention plans
- Dropout prevention teams in each community/school district
- Early childhood education programs, including Head Start
- Excel by 5
- Dropout recovery programs inside school districts and community-based
- Private initiatives (e.g., Community Educational Support Systems of Mississippi)
- Mississippi Scholars Initiative
- GED programs
- Businesses that hire student workers
- Youth Court involvement
- Wealth of potential volunteers in business and retirement communities
- Youth Challenge Program
- School-based community service programs
- PTO’s
- Area Development Partnership activities
- Community Reinvestment Act – banks coming to schools to help

Gaps – what is not available in the community

- Adequate funding
- More support for parents in the home
- More involvement from community mental health facilities
- More school guidance counselors
- Better guidance structure for student course selections
- Support for parent involvement in school guidance system
- School-based dropout recovery efforts that make it easier for a dropout to return to school
- Programs to involve grandparents
- Facilities, staff, and transportation for more after-school programs
- Child care for teenage mothers so they can finish high school
- More college involvement/presence needed in high schools
- Lack of life skills training (budgeting, job interviewing, etc.)
- More organized business support for schools
- More emphasis on preventive programs
- Gap between home expectations and school expectations
- Knowledge of what students are thinking

Actions that Can be Taken – what individuals can do now

- Parents must get more involved and take the lead in educating their children
- Develop better transition from middle school to high school
- Create more job-shadowing programs
- Emphasize (and remove the stigma from) vocational education
- Communicate and educate students on the full impact of dropping out
- Personal commitment to see students complete high school

Galvanizing and Organizing the Community

Opportunities – ways to galvanize the community

- The community must have an action plan
- Involve community leaders, retired teachers and administrators, faith-based leaders
- Business community needs to be involved in education with more of a presence in the schools and classrooms
- Dispel myths and stereotypes of dropouts
- Promote vocational training to be in line with the job market
- Use universities to promote involvement in high schools and middle schools
- Involve students and ask them for their input into solving the problem
- Make better use of existing resources to promote awareness (PTO's, ADP, neighborhood associations, etc.)

Barriers – what prevents making this a community priority

- We have to ask – people are waiting to help
- No perception of long-term personal impact
- Other priorities that compete for attention and resources
- Stigma of the dropout issue
- Low expectations
- Public perception of the “at-risk” student
- Understanding the use of technology

Communicating the Challenge – reaching everyone in the community

- Mass appeal – involve everyone – grass roots effort
- Continuous public awareness and education
- Involve students in reaching their peers
- Develop resources for families and ways to access them
- More publicity is needed – both good news and bad news
- Use information systems already in place – bank signs, USM message board, business advertising, etc.



Next Steps

After the Summit, what do we do now?

- Students who are at risk of dropping out should be part of the next summit
- Involve dropouts in dropout prevention
- Community members should educate themselves on their district’s dropout prevention plan
- Each summit participant should speak out on the dropout problem within their own network or circle of friends and contacts
- Implement true “Adopt A School” programs so that businesses become invested in the schools and the students
- Develop a business support program that allows employees to be involved in school-based programs
- Use billboards and public service announcements for continued public awareness of the dropout issue
- Develop home-based early childhood literacy programs
- Establish a timeline for community action steps
- Hold a “Graduation Bash” for the community to celebrate high school graduates

Emerging Issues

Other considerations noted by Summit participants:

- How can we identify the children at risk of dropping out at the earliest possible age?
- How can a one-on-one relationship be established with each at-risk child so that time can be spent with him or her each day?
- How can we keep the momentum going?
- Change the sole focus of high school as college prep and focus on vocational programming.
- Can public assistance be tied to proof of school attendance and performance?
- Establish a higher level of expectations of students held by all segments of the community.
- Prepare teachers to teach in more diverse ways.

Footnotes

- 1 Quoted from "The High School Dropout's Economic Ripple Effect", by Gary Fields, The Wall Street Journal, October 21, 2008.
- 2 Data cited in the following bullets from "Dropouts, Diplomas, and Dollars: U. S. High Schools and the Nation's Economy", by Jason Amos, Alliance for Excellent Education, August 2008.
- 3 Data in Appendix A are from the latest available Mississippi Department of Education reports.
- 4 Quoted from "Counting on Graduation: An Agenda for State Leadership", by Anna Habash, The Education Trust, Fall 2008
- 5 The adult summit report, "Adult Summit Evaluation Report", by Dr. John P. Bartkowski, can be viewed with Adobe Acrobat Reader and can be found at http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/Dropout_Prevention/presentations/Evaluation%20Report.pdf
- 6 Quoted from Center for Mental Health in Schools report, National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, Clemson University, 2001.
- 7 Quoted from "Adult Summit Evaluation Report" listed in 5 above.

Photographs courtesy of Jas N Smith, Hattiesburg Public School District.

High School Graduation Rates
Southeast Mississippi

<u>School District</u>	<u>2003/2004 Graduation Rate*</u>
Hattiesburg	57.2%
Petal	83.3%
Forrest Co.	66.2%
Forrest Co. AHS	62.8%
Richton	83.3%
Perry Co.	82.7%
Lamar Co.	81.9%
Lumberton	78.7%
Greene Co.	68.3%
Wayne Co.	78.8%
Laurel	68.1%
Jones Co.	75.5%
Covington Co.	73.6%
Jeff Davis Co.	61.3%
Columbia	58.3%
Marion Co.	71.4%
State	73.8%

* Percent of students in the 9th grade in 2003/2004 who will complete high school on time with a traditional high school diploma. Basically, this was the 2007 graduating class. This was calculated using only students who were in The 9th grade for the first time during the 2003/2004 school year.

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Great Southern National Bank	Trustmark National Bank
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