

spotlight

No. 358 – September 16, 2008

DROPOUT PREVENTION GRANTS

An update

KEY FACTS: • During the last legislative session, the North Carolina General Assembly voted to reestablish the Committee on Dropout Prevention and add \$15 million to the existing \$7 million for dropout prevention grants.

- The purpose of the dropout prevention grants is to raise the graduation rate. Among districts receiving grants last year, 27 of 38 had a *declining* graduation rate from the 2006-07 school year to the 2007-08 school year.
- The average graduation rate among districts receiving grants fell from 71.4 percent to 68.8 percent, and the average change in graduation rate was -2.6 percent.
- A number of school systems have increased their graduation rate using existing resources; that is, without dropout prevention grant funding.
- Programs should not receive additional funding or replication based on anecdotal evidence. Instead, grant recipients should be able to quantify their program's ability to retain students and significantly increase the district graduation rate or lower the district dropout rate.

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In February 2008, the John Locke Foundation argued that before legislators invest more taxpayer money on unproven dropout prevention programs, they should take the simple yet overlooked step of determining why students in North Carolina drop out in the first place.¹ Instead, the North Carolina General Assembly voted to reestablish the Committee on Dropout Prevention and appropriate an additional \$15 million for dropout prevention grants. Adding to the \$7 million already spent on dropout prevention grants, the \$15 million in additional funds will provide further support to existing grant recipients, as well as fund applicants that did not receive a grant initially.²

A Downward Trend

In August 2008, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction released four-year (cohort) graduation rates for the 2007-08 school year. The four-

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year graduation rate represents the percentage of students that start ninth grade and graduate four years later.

While there was a slight increase in the statewide graduation rate, school districts that received dropout prevention grants generally had lower graduation rates than the year before. Among districts receiving grants, 27 of 38 had a declining graduation rate from the 2006-07 school year to the 2007-08 school year (see Table 1). The average graduation rate among grantee districts fell from 71.4 percent to 68.8 percent, and the average change in graduation rate was -2.6 percent.³

On the school level, there was no consistent trend in graduation rates compared to the last school year. For example, John T. Hoggard High School in New Hanover County had a nearly six percent point drop, from 86.7 percent in 2006-2007 to 80.9 percent in 2007-2008. On the other hand, South Stokes High School (+2.1 percent) and East Henderson High School (+5.7 percent) had notable increases in their respective graduation rates.⁴

Among grant recipients, the largest increase in graduation rates belonged to the Hickory Public Schools. Given the fact that their dropout prevention program is for middle school students, the school district appears to be doing a fine job increasing the graduation rate on its own (see Table 2).

On the other hand, the largest decrease in graduation rates belonged to the Carter G. Woodson Public Charter School in Forsyth County. While the 35 percent drop is cause for concern, it should be pointed out that the school had only 16 students eligible for graduation last year (see Table 3).⁵

Immediate Results?

Those who designed (and continue to champion) the grant program clearly believed that the programs would yield immediate results. Programs received funding for the 2008 calendar year only. Legislators initially decreed that the program end date would be June 30, 2008, thus establishing a January to June timeframe for the grants. Obviously, that timeframe was particularly problematic for programs conducted during the summer months or the fall. As a result, representatives of the North Carolina General Assembly Dropout Prevention Grant Committee negotiated with House Speaker Joe Hackney for a more "realistic" end date of December 2008.⁶

The General Assembly expects programs to demonstrate their effectiveness by the end of the 2008 calendar year. Grant recipients must submit an initial report to the Committee on Dropout Prevention by January 31, 2009. The committee will report those interim results by March 31, 2009. At that point, the Dropout Prevention Grant Committee will supposedly have enough data to be able to determine which projects deserve additional funding.⁷

Which Districts Are Successfully Increasing Their Graduation Rate Without a Grant?

During last year's debate over the dropout prevention grants, Rep. Dan Blue (D – Wake County) pointed out that grant programs that were funded seem

to replicate what [school systems] already are doing or what they should be doing, in most instances. There are tremendous dollars spent in dropout prevention, and when you look at the results in certain sectors of the student population, one would ask, again playing devil's advocate, whether just not spending anything in dropout prevention would yield the same results; some of the numbers are so disconcerting.⁸

School systems *are* spending tremendous dollars in dropout prevention, and a number of them have increased their graduation rate using existing resources, that is, without dropout prevention grant funding (see Table 4).⁹ Before appropriating more taxpayer money for grants, the Dropout Prevention Grant Committee should take a closer look at districts that successfully raised their graduation rates without a grant.

Table 1. Overview of Grant Recipients¹⁰

County	Recipient	Amount	Strategy	Target Population	2007 District Grad Rate	2008 District Grad Rate	Change
Alamance	Alamance-Burlington School System	\$67,121	To increase parental involvement and integrate social, cultural, and educational activities.	Middle school	71.7	70.8	-0.9
Anson	Anson County Schools	\$150,000	To develop academic, social, and personal skills; parental behavioral contract, training.	7 th grade	64.7	64.3	-0.4
Avery	Avery County Schools	\$148,474	To reinforce goals and skills taught in other school programs and provide professional development for faculty advisors.	Middle and high school	81.3	76.3	-5.0
Beaufort	Beaufort County Schools	\$150,000	To provide at-risk students an alternate route to earn academic credit.	Not specified	62.8	62.2	-0.6
Buncombe	YWCA of Asheville and Western North Carolina	\$89,300	For on-campus and off-campus mentoring, including homework assistance, service learning projects, and teen pregnancy prevention.	9 th and 10 th grade	73.4	72.1	-1.3
	Buncombe County Schools	\$150,000	To provide a summer bridge experience, accelerated coursework, and credit recovery.	6 th , 9 th , 11 th , and 12 th grades	73.4	72.1	-1.3
Burke	Burke County Public Schools	\$149,840	To focus on attendance intervention, mentoring, academic support, and family attitudes.	6 th and 9 th grades	65.2	69.8	+4.6
Caldwell	The Sovereign Alliance for Youth	\$150,000	To create an alternative high school that will encourage students to make positive choices.	High school	70.7	67.4	-3.3
Carteret	Carteret County Public Schools	\$149,690	To create a summer program that will include intensive academic and leadership training.	9 th and 10 th grade	79.1	77.6	-1.5
Chatham	Chatham County Schools	\$148,000	To restructure teaching methods and to prepare students for college.	Grades 4 – 12	75.0	79.9	+4.9
Chowan	Edenton-Chowan Schools	\$150,000	To hire a full-time Life Coach Coordinator and three part-time Life Coaches.	Middle and high school	73.6	64.4	-9.2
Clay	Clay County Schools	\$150,000	To provide a mentoring program, job placement, dual enrollment, sublimation enterprise, tutoring, career counseling, and technology opportunities.	Middle and high school	84.3	76.5	-7.8
Cleveland	Cleveland County Schools	\$148,835	To expand Davidson Alternative School and the Phoenix Program; Connected Schools/Applied Control Theory staff development, and hire a Truancy Court Coordinator.	Middle and high school	70.9	67.9	-3.0
	Communities In Schools of Cleveland County, Inc.	\$94,377	For Club ACE, an intervention to reduce retention rates and increase parent involvement.	Not specified	70.9	67.9	-3.0
Columbus	Columbus County Schools	\$150,000	To support a Truancy Prevention/Intervention program, introduce SuccessMaker and NovaNet to additional schools, and sustain an effective prevention program through a proactive model.	Not specified	69.5	63.4	-6.1
Durham	Durham Public Schools	\$149,302	To implement a "Twilight School" featuring classes beginning in the afternoon.	Not specified	66.3	62.9	-3.4
	North Carolina Central University Foundation	\$150,000	To improve student outcomes by implementing its holistic, comprehensive, and continuous model of intervention and prevention strategies	Not specified	66.3	62.9	-3.4
Forsyth	Carter G. Woodson Public Charter School	\$131,466	To create a "We Are All Winners" environment, provide intensive educational experiences, and create a Career & Talent Development Academy.	K – 12	60.0	25.0	-35.0
	<i>Note: C.G. Woodson Charter School had ten students in the 06-07 graduating class and 16 students in the 07 – 08 graduating class.</i>						
	The Housing Authority of the City of Winston-Salem	\$149,660	To implement academic programs and activities for students living in public housing communities.	Middle and high school	70.7	70.8	+0.1
	The YWCA of Winston-Salem in Forsyth County	\$150,000	To work with students enrolled at Carver H.S., looking at the student as a "whole valuable person" rather than an "academic failure."	11 th grade	70.7	70.8	+0.1
<i>Note: Graduation rates for Carver High School were 73.2 percent in 2006-2007 and 67.9 percent in 2007-2008.</i>							
Gaston	Gaston County Schools	\$149,570	For its "Why Try?" Program, helping students realize why they should work for an education.	K – 12	71.2	72.3	+1.1
Graham	Graham County Schools	\$150,000	To begin AVID, SUCCEED Gateway Program, and the Re-entry Fast Track Program, all which will encourage and motivate students.	6 th grade	70.6	62.4	-8.2

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County	Recipient	Amount	Strategy	Target Population	2007 District Grad Rate	2008 District Grad Rate	Change	
Guilford	Centro de Accion Latino of Guilford County	\$72,500	To address student academic, emotional, physical, and social needs.	Not specified	79.7	79.5	-0.2	
	Communities in Schools of High Point	\$80,881	To work with Latino students and families from Ferndale M.S. and High Point Central H.S.; require students to maintain a 2.0 grade point average, graduate, and remain alcohol, crime, and drug free.	Middle and high schools	79.7	79.5	-0.2	
	<i>Note: Graduation rates for High Point Central High School were 77.6 percent in 06-07 and 77.3 percent in 07-08; Graduation rates for Hispanic students at High Point Central High School were 48.4 percent (31 students) in 06-07 and 58.8 percent (17 students) in 07-08.</i>							
	The New Light at Risk Intergenerational Outreach Suspension Program	\$149,320	To assist students who have academic, economic, social, and emotional difficulties; uses parental involvement and self-motivation classes.	Not specified	79.7	79.5	-0.2	
	North Carolina A&T State University	\$150,000	To use step dancing to teach teamwork, discipline, academics, and leadership development.	Not specified	79.7	79.5	-0.2	
	Operation Homework	\$118,540	To provide an after school program that will provide a curriculum that supports and supplements what students are learning.	Not specified	79.7	79.5	-0.2	
Harnett	Harnett County Schools	\$150,000	For a NovaNet Credit Recovery Course for students who have failed 2 or more classes.	High school	71.0	71.8	+0.8	
Hertford	Building Excellence and Reaping Success program	\$25,390	To address deficiencies in reading and/or mathematics of African-American males.	9 th grade	68.9	62.1	-6.8	
	<i>Note: Graduation rates for African-Americans in Hertford were 68.9 percent in 06-07 and 62.1 percent in 07-08.</i>							
	Hertford County Public Schools	\$96,769	To provide students with an interest in mathematics, science, technology and career development activities.	Not specified	68.9	62.1	-6.8	
Hickory	Hickory Public Schools	\$149,650	To create and implement the "Using Sixth Sense," which uses research-based predictors and interventions to address potential dropouts.	Middle school	70.8	76.8	+6.0	
Hoke	Hoke County Schools	\$147,553	To help students achieve grade level status, improve decision-making, and become more involved in the community.	Middle and high school	63.7	69.0	+5.3	
Iredell	Iredell-Statesville Schools	\$149,966	For Project SAGE, an after school and summer program featuring case management, Parent Institute courses, and Family Night.	Not specified	75.3	80.7	+5.4	
Lenoir	S.O.A.R. Academy	\$60,000	School-within-a-school dropout prevention and acceleration program.	8 th and 9 th grades	66.3	65.1	-1.2	
McDowell	McDowell County Schools	\$132,920	Expand the AVID and "Why Try" programs, which build life skills.	6 th , 11 th , and 12 th grades	68.1	68.6	+0.5	
Mecklenburg	Communities In Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Inc.	\$150,000	For their Performance Learning Center (PLC).	High school	73.8	66.6	-7.2	
	Cross Country for Youth and ACE-21 st CCLC	\$150,000	To implement school-based community learning centers at four inner-city schools in Charlotte.	Not specified	73.8	66.6	-7.2	
	The Urban Restoration	\$99,000	Summer program for students from West Charlotte schools.	Middle and high school	73.8	66.6	-7.2	
Mitchell	Mitchell High School	\$95,032	To help students address social issues that can affect school success, including poverty, drug and domestic abuse, and pregnancy.	Not specified	70.9	61.0	-9.9	
Moore	Northern Moore Family Resource Center	\$86,500	To increase the school readiness of Latino children, increase parental involvement/skills, and enhance English language skills.	Infants	76.0	73.1	-2.9	
	<i>Note: Graduation rates for Hispanic students in Moore County were 69.2 percent in 06-07 and 69.6 percent in 07-08.</i>							
	The Youth Resource Center of Moore County	\$57,565	To assist adolescents in Brookshire Housing Development with setting standards and to promote effective governance and management.	Not specified	76.0	73.1	-2.9	
New Hanover	DREAMS Center for Arts Education	\$85,500	To offer high-quality, free-of-charge visual and performing arts classes to students at high-risk of dropping out.	Not specified	64.0	63.6	-0.4	
	John T. Hoggard High School	\$105,549	For Project Dash, a program that includes a high school transition course using the book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens."	9 th grade	64.0	63.6	-0.4	
	<i>Note: Graduation rates for Hoggard High School were 86.7 percent in 06-07 and 80.9 percent in 07-08.</i>							
	New Hanover County Schools	\$143,178	To identify at-risk students through graduation coaches and offer community resources and reenrollment options.	Middle and high school	64.0	63.6	-0.4	

County	Recipient	Amount	Strategy	Target Population	2007 District Grad Rate	2008 District Grad Rate	Change
Orange	Communities in Schools of Orange County	\$150,000	For its Green Life Engineering Project; during the summer, students will work on math, science, and engineering projects led by college students.	9 th grade	75.5	75.3	-0.2
Orange (and others)	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	\$126,651	Teacher training aimed at improving relationships and instructional strategies for "boys of color."	Pre-K – 3 rd grade	75.5	75.3	-0.2
Pasquotank	Education Foundation for Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Schools	\$39,008	For the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program.	Not specified	62.8	64.9	+2.1
Pitt	Building Hope Community Life Center	\$90,000	To provide a character education program.	Grades 6 – 12	62.4	54.0	-8.4
	The Link Crew	\$130,590	For a transition program that focuses on students' core academics, character building, and proper study habits.	9 th grade	62.4	54.0	-8.4
	Wellcome Middle School	\$61,585	For the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program.	Middle school	62.4	54.0	-8.4
Polk	Polk County Schools	\$100,677	For a summer school transition program.	K – 12	82.0	76.6	-5.4
Randolph	Randolph County Schools	\$88,627	For its Fast Forward program that teaches curriculum at an accelerated pace; requires community service, field trips, and a retreat.	Middle school	72.4	72.8	+0.4
Stokes	South Stokes High School	\$54,370	Activities that help students develop personal relationships with school personnel and find relevancy in course work.	Not specified	79.6	75.7	-3.9
	<i>Note: Graduation rates for South Stokes High School were 77.6 percent in 06-07 and 79.7 percent in 07-08.</i>						
Swain	Swain County Schools	\$126,189	For an evening school, a peer mentoring program, a credit recovery program, staff development, a transition program, and after school program.	High school	66.9	69.7	+2.8
Various	Western Region Education Service Alliance	\$25,000	For a program that allows educators in Western North Carolina to share dropout prevention strategies; partner with East Henderson H.S. for the "Jumpstart" program.	Not specified	N/A	N/A	N/A
	<i>Note: Graduation rates for East Henderson High School were 80.6 percent in 06-07 and 86.3 percent in 07-08.</i>						
Wake	Athens Drive High School	\$38,979	To improve and initiatives, literacy training for teachers, and a mentor program	9 th and 10 th grade	79.3	78.8	-0.5
	<i>Note: Graduation rates for Athens Drive High School were 82.7 percent in 06-07 and 79.0 percent in 07-08.</i>						
	Futures for Kids of Wake County	\$150,000	To connect students to real people and companies; to provide relevance and motivation for graduating and creating a career plan.	Middle and high school	79.3	78.8	-0.5
	The Harriet B. Webster Task Force for Student Success	\$124,865	For its Engaging Students to Achieve program for Carnage M.S. students, who will receive tutoring, counseling, summer enrichment, and employment.	Middle school	79.3	78.8	-0.5
	Wake Forest-Rolesville Middle School	\$134,514	Mentors from Wake Forest-Rolesville H.S. School and Wakefield H.S. as mentors to middle school.	Middle school	79.3	78.8	-0.5
Wilkes	Communities in Schools of Wilkes County	\$29,231	To expand its weekly program, "Girl Power" and create "Girl Power II." Create "Wise Guys" program.	6 th – 8 th grades	72.8	72.7	-0.1

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Table 2. Five Largest Graduation Rate Increases Among Dropout Prevention Grant Districts

County	Recipient	Amount	Target Population	2007 District Grad Rate	2008 District Grad Rate	Change
Hickory	Hickory Public Schools	\$149,650	Middle school	70.8	76.8	6.0
Iredell	Iredell-Statesville Schools	\$149,966	Not specified	75.3	80.7	5.4
Hoke	Hoke County Schools	\$147,553	Middle and high school	63.7	69.0	5.3
Chatham	Chatham County Schools	\$148,000	Grades 4 – 12	75.0	79.9	4.9
Burke	Burke County Public Schools	\$149,840	6 th and 9 th grades	65.2	69.8	4.6



Table 3. Five Largest Graduation Rate Decreases Among Dropout Prevention Grant Districts/Schools

County	Recipient	Amount	Target Population	2007 District Grad Rate	2008 District Grad Rate	Change
Forsyth	C.G. Woodson Public Charter School	\$131,466	K – 12	60.0	25.0	-35.0
Mitchell	Mitchell High School	\$95,032	Not Specified	70.9	61.0	-9.9
Chowan	Edenton-Chowan Schools	\$150,000	Middle and high school	73.6	64.4	-9.2
Pitt	Building Hope Community Life Center	\$90,000	Grades 6 – 12	62.4	54.0	-8.4
Graham	Graham County Schools	\$150,000	6 th Grade	70.6	62.4	-8.2



Table 4. Ten Largest Graduation Rate Increases Among All NC School Districts

LEA Name	06-07 Rate	07-08 Rate	Change	Grant Recipient?
Martin County Schools	54.6	72.5	17.9	No
Lee County Schools	63.4	71.4	8.0	No
Whiteville City Schools	57.8	65.7	7.9	No
Person County Schools	67.9	75.3	7.4	No
Camden County Schools	74.7	81.8	7.1	No
Hickory City Schools	70.8	76.8	6.0	Yes
Iredell-Statesville Schools	75.3	80.7	5.4	Yes
Onslow County Schools	71.6	77.0	5.4	No
Hoke County Schools	63.7	69.0	5.3	Yes
Franklin County Schools	66.5	71.6	5.1	No

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Conclusion

The results outlined in Tables 1–3 should not suggest that the grant programs directly lowered or raised graduation rates, but they do suggest a troublesome, downward slide in district rates that the dropout grants were designed to stop. Further research will be required to get a complete picture of the relationship, if any, between dropout prevention grants and graduation rates.

There are two obstacles to that research effort. First, many of the dropout prevention grants will not register an immediate, quantifiable effect on a district or school graduation rate because the programs were designed to reach at-risk elementary and middle school students. More importantly, it will be difficult for grant recipients to establish direct, causal connections between the dropout prevention programs and district or school graduation rates. Programs should not receive additional funding or replication based on anecdotal evidence. Instead, grant recipients should be able to quantify their program's ability to retain students and significantly increase the district or school graduation rate.

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End Notes

1. Terry Stoops, "Dropout Prevention Grants: Good Money for Bad Ideas," John Locke Foundation *Spotlight* No. 342, February 20, 2008, www.johnlocke.org/spotlights/display_story.html?id=192.
2. General Assembly of North Carolina, "Session Law 2008-107: An Act To Modify The Current Operations And Capital Appropriations Act Of 2007, To Authorize Indebtedness For Capital Projects, And To Make Various Tax Law And Fee Changes," pp. 21-24.
3. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI), "Cohort Graduation Rate," ayp.ncpublicschools.org, accessed on August 18, 2008; NC DPI, "LEA and State Cohort Graduation Rate," August 7, 2008, www.dpi.state.nc.us/newsroom/news/2008-09/20080807-03.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. North Carolina General Assembly, Dropout Prevention Grant Committee, "November 6, 2007 Meeting Minutes," p. 1.
7. General Assembly of North Carolina, "Session Law 2008-107," p. 23.
8. Joint Legislative Commission on Dropout Prevention and High School Graduation, January 29, 2008 meeting.
9. NC DPI, "Cohort Graduation Rate."
10. NC DPI, "Dropout Prevention Grants Awarded to 60 Groups Across North Carolina," January 23, 2008, www.dpi.state.nc.us/newsroom/news/2007-08/20080123-01.