Outside organizations often categorize Fall River students by a percentage of free and reduced lunch, special needs, limited English, ethnic background, and most recently, dropouts.

All too often demographics are used to define a community. However, the recent release of “Dropout Prevention in the SouthCoast: Choosing a New Path to Economic Prosperity” by the Urban Initiative at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth provides our community with recommendations to create a destiny where all students and families benefit from economic prosperity.

The Urban Initiative report identifies five strategies to reduce dropout rates in our region: mentoring/tutoring, early childhood education, family engagement, career and technical education and school-community collaboration.

Schools play a key role in each recommendation, and yet to create a destiny of economic prosperity, we need strong school-community collaboration so that all students achieve and thrive.

There are ways we can continue to build an infrastructure of school and community engagement. For example, we know that one adult can make the difference in the life of a child. The SMILES mentoring program is making a difference in the lives of many students in Fall River and more mentors are needed.

Community-based organizations can also play an important role in helping our youngest children grow and develop. While public education begins at age five, children from birth to age five thrive when programs and services support parents as their child’s first teacher.

The Community Learning Center at Viveiros School is identified in the report as an exemplary program and shows promising signs of creating new ways of community support for parents and children. Additional community learning centers in the city will provide more services to the many families waiting to develop necessary skills and knowledge.

Moreover, a new wave of evidence finds student achievement is dependent upon family engagement. The evidence provides schools with a number of strategies to increase family engagement. We will use these strategies to ensure that all families are welcomed, honored and engaged in our schools.

Fall River has long understood the importance of education. It is also a community with a proud tradition of work ethic and productivity.

The connection between school and work however is increasingly interdependent. The jobs that were once available to those without a high school diploma are gone. Our schools are charged with developing a work force for a knowledge-based economy.

Companies are hiring the most highly educated people that they can find or afford. This means students who are either unprepared or drop out are sentenced to a lifetime of marginal employment.

Lessons can be learned from successful career and technical programs. We need to show students how math concepts apply in the solution of real-world problems and how science is used in workplaces. They need to see and understand, through job shadowing and internships, what skills adults need and how they use them in their daily work.

Fall River is poised to become a regional leader in biotechnology and renewable energy. Our students, through strong school-community engagement, will become work force-ready for a knowledge-based economy.

The dropout prevention report concludes with a community call to action, noting the dropout crisis is not a problem to be solved solely by the region’s school districts, but rather, a crisis that we must all take ownership of and resolve to correct as part of a collaborative effort of individuals and stakeholder groups.

It is with great admiration for this community, its people, and most importantly, our children that I support the call to action and advocate for maximizing our limited resources for funding, programming and systemic change to reach our community’s unlimited potential.
Meg Mayo-Brown is the superintendent of Fall River schools.