Report tracks wider effects of dropping out

By Will Richmond
Herald News Staff Reporter

Fall River — A new report that shows students dropping out of school early affects more than just graduation rates offers some approaches to the problem that could not only boost progress in South Coast schools but also improve the region’s image for prospective businesses.

The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth’s The Urban Initiative will release the report titled “Dropout Prevention in the South Coast: Choosing a New Path to Economic Prosperity” today.

The release is expected to coincide with the announcement of a new partnership to confront high school dropout and educational attainment challenges in the South Coast.

Sponsored by the South Coast Development Partnership, the report addresses how the low educational attainment in the region — with fewer people completing high school or attending college, particularly in Fall River and New Bedford — is having “a negative effect on the desire of companies and industries to expand or locate here.”

“The message must be clearly delivered and understood that current dropout rates in the South Coast are significantly harming the region, both economically and socially, and that immediate action is required,” the report states.

The report offers a series of recommendations on how educational and business leaders can help remedy a situation that is growing from a “chronic problem to (an) acute crisis.”

A group from UMass Dartmouth and the South Coast Development Partnership delivered advance copies of the report during a meeting at The Herald News Wednesday morning.

“School systems are under the scope that this is their problem, but it’s not just their problem;” UMass Dartmouth Assistant Chancellor for Economic Development Paul Vigeant said. “This is not taking the school systems off the hook ... But this kind of thing is really a communitywide problem.”

While many of the suburban communities on the South Coast have had success in keeping students in school, the two urban school systems have struggled. The most recent numbers from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education show that only 56.1 percent of New Bedford students who enter high school in 2004 graduated. Fall River’s graduation rate for the same span was 56 percent.

The numbers from the two cities sink the region’s average graduation rate to 72.4 percent. Each of the other educational communities have rates of 79.5 percent or higher.

Vigeant said companies looking to locate businesses in the South Coast are reconsidering their plans due to the lack of educational attainment in the region as a whole.

Urban Institute Director Edward M. Lambert Jr. said the region is losing $232 million in potential payroll because low educational attainment accounts for the 20 to 25 percent disparity between this region’s unemployment rate and the rest of the state.

To help turn those figures around, the report suggests five primary strategies developed after surveying and interviewing stakeholders in each of the South Coast school districts. National models and research were also consulted, including strategies developed by the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University. The university has produced 15 strategies to address the issue.

Included in those strategies is reaching students at a young age by increasing early education opportunities and improving family engagement.

While the plan would best meet the needs in the urban school districts, Lambert said, it is important the region as a whole embrace these actions.

“This is really all of our responsibility to solve,” Lambert said. “That’s why we have to take a regional approach. There’s not a lot regional approaches being taken to address this issue, most districts attempt it on their own.”
That’s why UMass Dartmouth is enlisting the assistance of The Urban Institute and the SouthCoast Development Partnership in a coordinating role. Lambert said the dropout recovery plan recommends establishing benchmarks over the next 10 years that draw upon action from various regional sources.

“The changes are not going to happen quickly, but that’s why we’ve got to take a leadership role,” said Jennifer Menard, executive director of economic development for the SouthCoast Development Partnership.

E-mail Will Richmond at wrichmond@heraldnews.com.

Click here to read the full dropout report