UMass Dartmouth report laments city schools' 'disturbing' dropout problem

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DARTMOUTH — It is the adults, not the children, who may hold the key to SouthCoast's high school dropout problem, a new report by the UMass Dartmouth Urban Initiative suggests.

The report, commissioned by the SouthCoast Development Partnership, covers in great detail much familiar territory on the subject of dropouts, and spells out how much the dropout rate puts the region at a competitive disadvantage.

But some other economically struggling Massachusetts "gateway cities" have half the number of dropouts as New Bedford and Fall River, which the report called a "disturbing trend."

"Compared to two other cities with similar demographics (Lowell and Brockton), SouthCoast's two cities have dropout rates almost twice as high.

"The variable that did separate these two pairs of cities, besides their dropout rates, was the educational attainment levels of each community's adult population — rates that were much higher in Brockton and Lowell than Fall River and New Bedford," the report concluded.

That low achievement level feeds back into the school systems, the report pointed out.

"Especially troubling are the number of adults in the region, and particularly in the two cities, that possess less than a ninth-grade education," the report stated. "In fact, nearly one in four adults in these cities has less than a ninth-grade education.

"This speaks to the magnitude of the challenge we face in preparing the work force and enhancing the education of the region's adults so that they may become active participants in their child's learning and serve as a standard for educational achievement that our children can aspire to," the authors said.

The team that produced the report, led by former Fall River Mayor Edward M. Lambert Jr., acknowledged that some suburban communities have the dropout problem under control while others face struggles not on a scale with the problems in the cities. And it points out that individual communities have made localized attempts to bring the dropout rates under control.

But it found that in the last eight years, while state dropout rates declined 6 percent, SouthCoast rates increased 30 percent.

Businesses look at that, said the report, and see trouble. "Evidence exists that reviews of educational data by businesses is done on a regional basis, not on a community-by-community basis, leading us to further suggest that the problem and its solution must be addressed on a regional level.

The authors suggest that the sponsors of the study, the business and civic leaders who are pushing for regional approaches to education and economic development, would be well suited to lead a regional campaign to tackle dropout rates.

The roll-out of the report was accompanied by the announcement that UMass Dartmouth has entered into an agreement with the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson to be its first satellite affiliate, which will help with assessment of local efforts and the use of "best practices."

But the report struck a note of caution: "Dropout reduction is not a problem to be solved overnight, if it is to be fully solved at all. While there is no silver bullet, communities are not helpless and can devise strategies that will reduce and mitigate dropouts in the face of substantial societal odds.

"For these reasons, assessment and benchmarking must be done fairly, with buy-in from the major stakeholders, particularly school officials who may well feel that they bear the brunt of such benchmarking strategies. It is important to note, however, that benchmarking should be done in such a way as to hold the entire region accountable for the results. Therefore, a wide group of stakeholders need to be involved in establishing and accepting the benchmarks."

Steve Urbon is senior correspondent of The Standard-Times.

Strategies

And after reviewing "Fifteen Research-Based Strategies" published by the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University, a new report by the UMass Dartmouth Urban Initiative settled on five that could work best in SouthCoast:

- Mentoring and tutoring on a one-on-one basis, as in the SMILES program. "This strategy is a tremendous, low-cost, short-term strategy with immediate effects on achievement and attendance --- two significant risk factors for dropping out."
- Early childhood education, a "great long-term 'equalizer' for students from low-income families."
- Family engagement "of the type that actively engages a family in their child's learning, rather than simply involving parents in school organizational activities."
- Career and technical education that lays out clear pathways, "similar to what exists in the vocational schools, will help make education much more relevant for a great number of students."
- School-community collaboration, which "challenges all groups in a community to provide collective support to the school, resulting in a strong infrastructure that sustains a caring environment where youth can achieve and thrive."

Factbox

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