UMASS DARTMOUTH
URBAN INITIATIVE

Dropout Prevention
PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

Fall River Public Schools

CONDUCTED BY

THE URBAN INITIATIVE
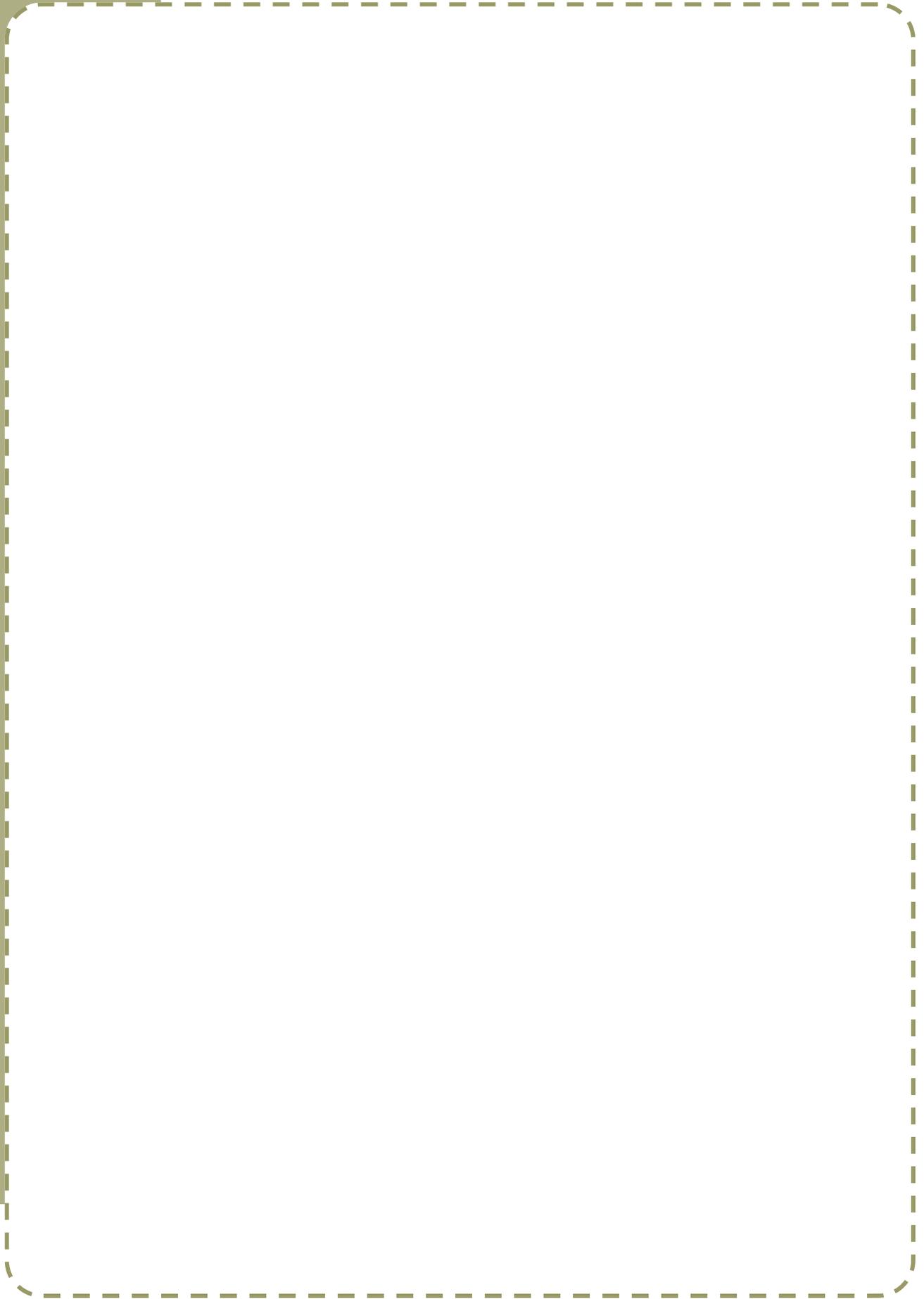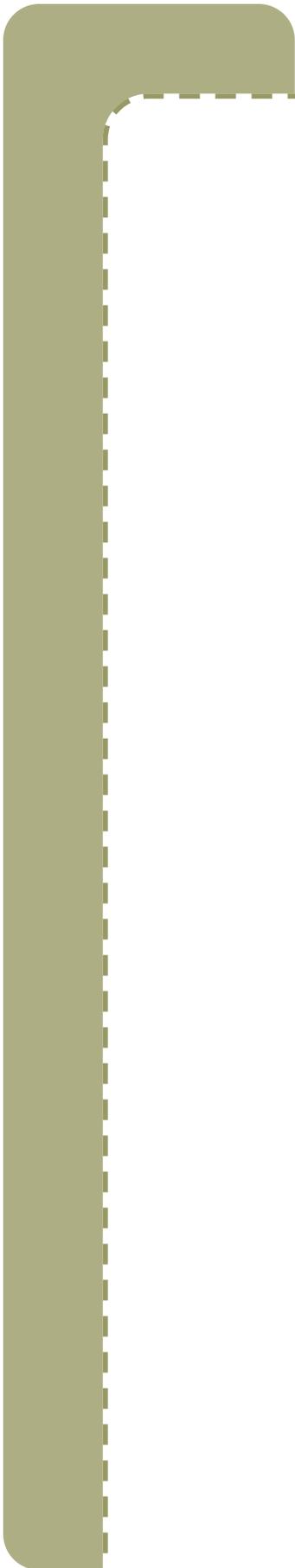UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS DARTMOUTH

NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CENTER
CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

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FALL RIVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS
CITY OF FALL RIVER, MASSACHUSETTS

URBAN INITIATIVE

Our Mission

The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth stands at the forefront of many of the major public policy issues that currently confront the regional communities we serve and the entire Commonwealth. With its thumb on the pulse of a wide range of issues including environmental and sustainability concerns, increasing regional educational achievement, and innovative approaches to energy conservation, the University has a history of uniting its educational, research, scientific, and technological resources toward positive efforts that contribute to the progress of our state.

Recognizing higher education's further potential to pursue and promote constructive statewide growth, the University's Chancellor, Dr. Jean F. MacCormack, commissioned the establishment of the Urban Initiative in November 2007, specifically to act on behalf of the many older urban communities throughout the Commonwealth that continue to struggle with the transition from manufacturing to today's knowledge-based economy. Since then, the urban revitalization movement throughout the state has garnered significant momentum and has earned the Urban Initiative a prominent role in its progression.

Considering that the University serves a region that contains several such cities, including Fall River, New Bedford, Brockton, and Taunton, the existence of the Urban Initiative makes not only regional, but also statewide sense. The presence of various policy challenges that have hindered progress in these urban areas represents an opportunity recognized by Chancellor MacCormack to further embed and engage the University in these and other communities in order to promote and affect the necessary policy changes that can lead to their revitalization and an improved quality of life for their residents.

The Urban Initiative's affiliation with the Center for Policy Analysis, a well-established research unit of UMass Dartmouth, is in keeping with the Center's long-held desire to bring a greater focus on urban policy to its own work.

The Urban Initiative's mission encompasses a fusion of research, project development and implementation, technical assistance, and policy analysis that supports the work of municipalities, state and local agencies, private and non-profit entities, and other organizations. Specifically, the Urban Initiative seeks to accomplish these goals by engaging our elected leaders, issuing research reports, hosting events and conferences, offering technical assistance and training to policy leaders, encouraging civic participation, and linking the University's resources to the region and beyond.

Fields of Focus

- ✧ Economic Development
- ✧ Workforce Development
- ✧ Municipal Organization and Finance
- ✧ Leadership
- ✧ Urban Education
- ✧ Urban Policy
- ✧ Civic Engagement
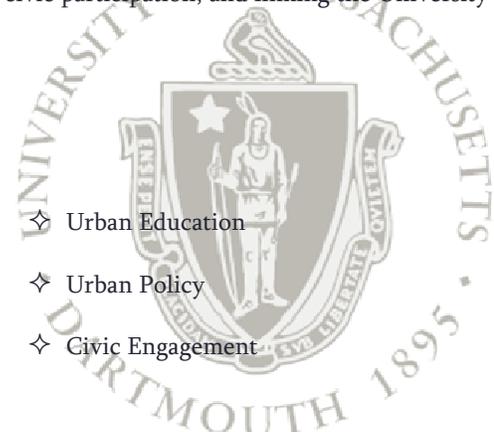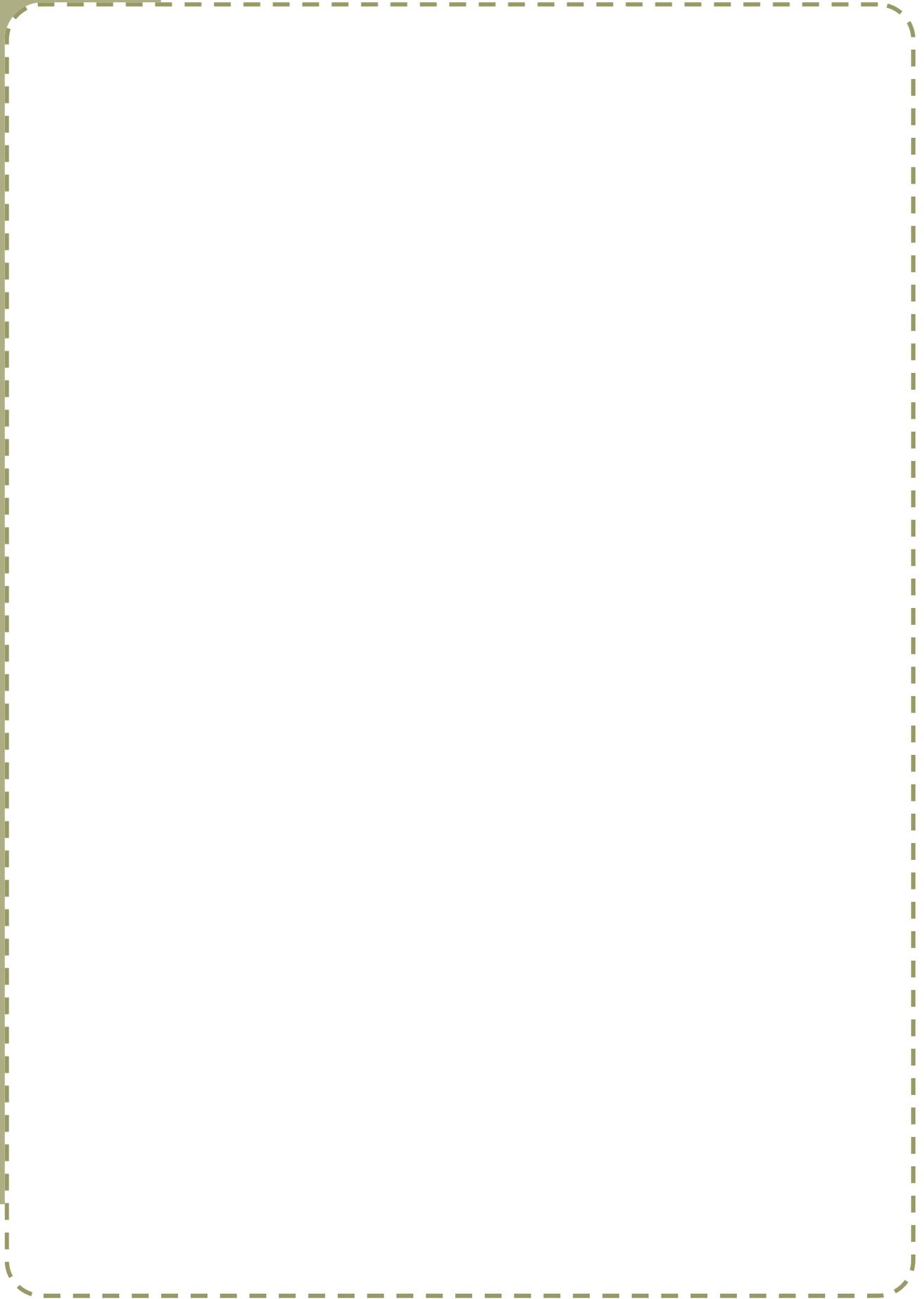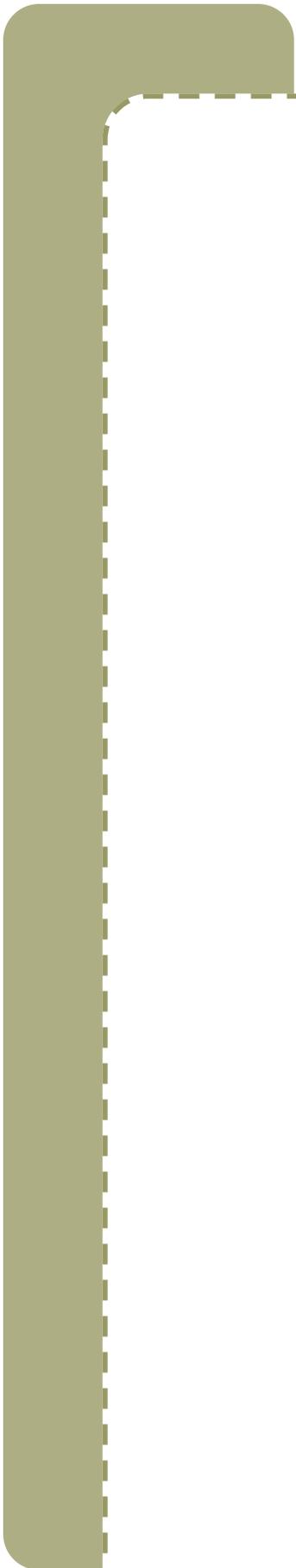
NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CENTER/NETWORK

**CLEMSON UNIVERSITY**

About the NDPC

The National Dropout Prevention Center is part of the College of Health, Education, and Human Development (HEHD) at Clemson University. It was inaugurated in October 1986 as part of the University's land grant mission of research and service. Specifically, it was created to serve as a clearinghouse on issues related to dropout prevention and to offer strategies designed to increase the graduation rate in America's schools. The NDPC is committed to meeting the needs of youth in at-risk situations by shaping school environments that ensure all youth receive the quality education to which they are entitled. The NDPC has one satellite center in partnership with the Urban Initiative at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

Over the years, the NDPC has become a well-established national resource for sharing solutions for student success. It does so through its clearinghouse function, active research projects, publications, and through a variety of professional development activities. In addition, the NDPC conducts a variety of third party evaluations and Program Assessment and Reviews (PAR).

The NDPC is also affiliated with the National Dropout Prevention Network (NDPN), a national membership organization of teachers, counselors, school administrators, state departments of education staff, and business and community leaders who are concerned with education issues. The NDPN is under the guidance of a national advisory board and the Director of the NDPC serves as the Executive Director of the NDPN Board.

The mission of the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network is to increase high school graduation rates through research and evidenced-based solutions.

Since 1986, the National Dropout Prevention/Network has worked to improve opportunities for all young people to fully develop the academic, social, work, and healthy life skills needed to graduate from high school and lead productive lives. By promoting awareness of successful programs and policies related to dropout prevention, the work of the Network and its members has made an impact on education from the local to the national level.
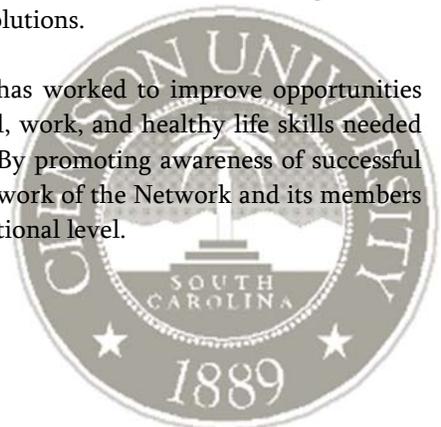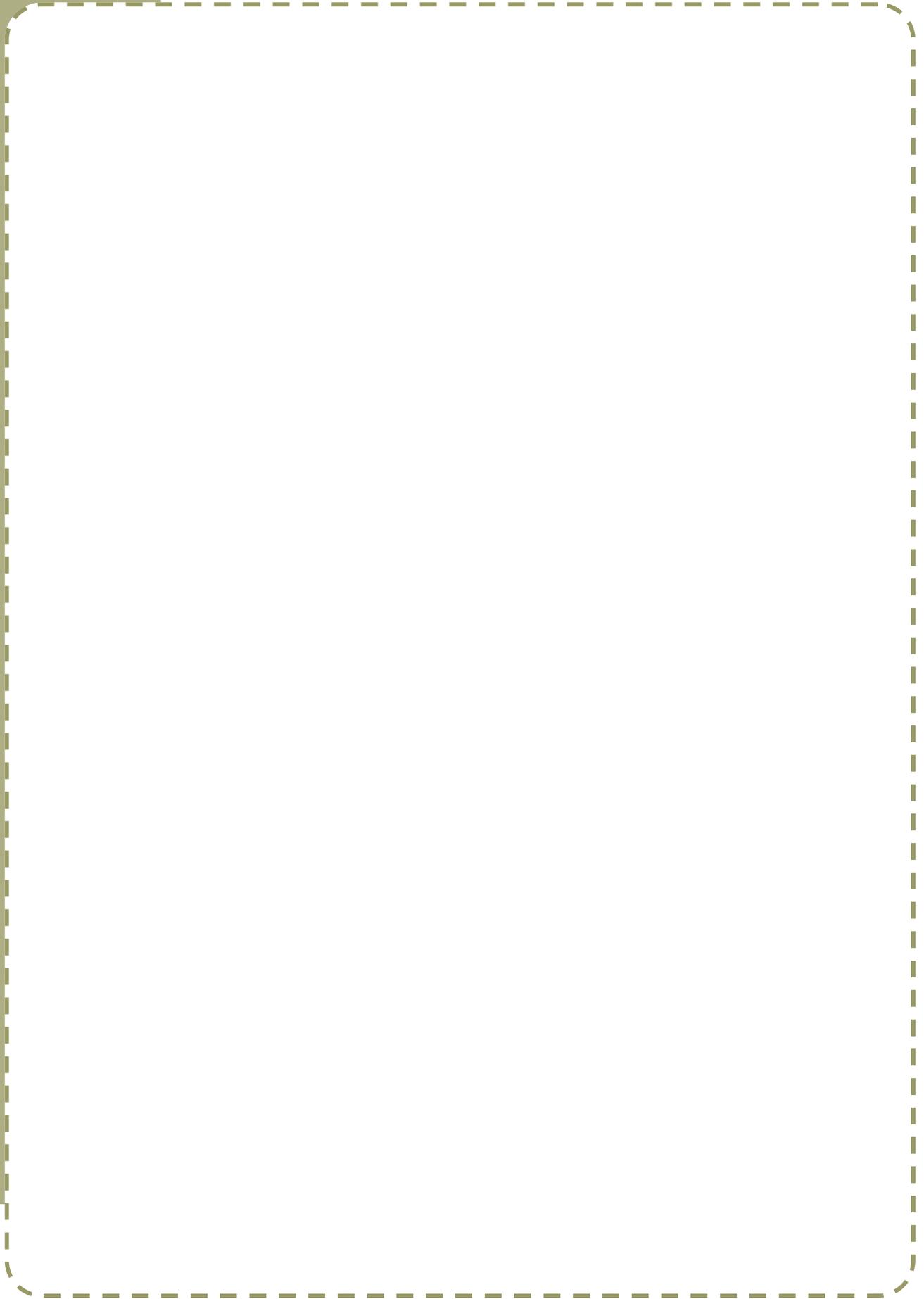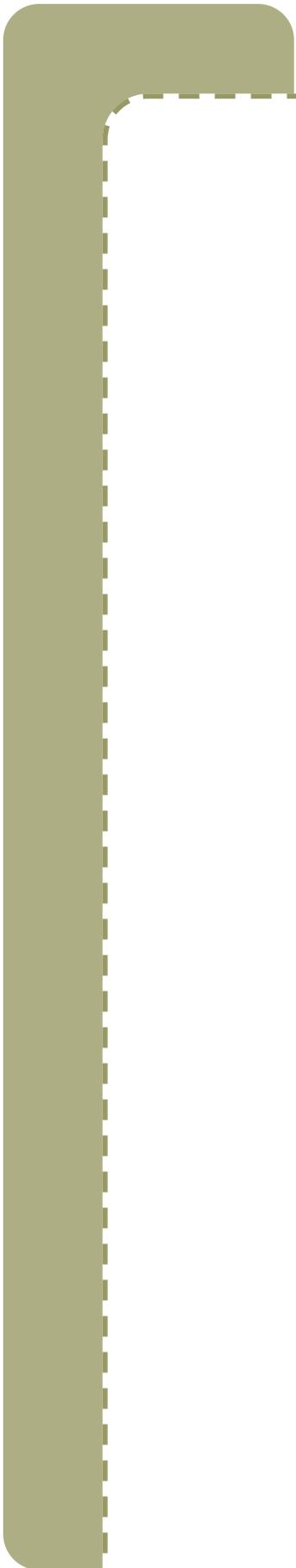
Dropout Prevention
PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

Fall River Public Schools

Prepared by

UMASS DARTMOUTH
URBAN INITIATIVE

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PROGRAM ASSESSMENT
### Fall River Public Schools

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fall River has demonstrated marked progress regarding dropout rates over the past several years (See **Figure 1**). Between the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years, the annual dropout rate for grades 9-12 was halved, going from 12.5 percent to 6.2 percent. Meanwhile, the 4-year cohort graduation rate climbed from 56 percent to 62.5 percent. Similarly positive is the district leadership's sustained commitment to dropout reduction, as evidenced in part by their decision to commission this assessment.

Nevertheless, there remains room for improvement regarding efforts aimed at dropout prevention. Despite the recent improvement in Fall River's aggregate graduation rate, students in particular subgroups (including students with special needs, Hispanic students, those with low household incomes, and students with limited English proficiency) continue to lag behind their peers (see **Figure 2**). Moreover, the Urban Initiative's assessment of dropout prevention programming revealed a need for not just programmatic change; Fall River Public Schools (FRPS) administrators, faculty, and staff must also reevaluate both policies and philosophies that stand in the way of sustaining the district's recent progress.

The following Dropout Prevention Program Assessment incorporates both qualitative and quantitative research gathered by the Urban Initiative as well as research conducted in schools throughout the country on dropout prevention and best practices. It also draws on work conducted by the National Dropout Prevention Center, a national research center affiliated with the Urban Initiative whose extensive work on this topic is reflected in the content of this report. These findings have informed the following summary of recommendations (detailed at greater length within the report) for ways in which FRPS can continue to make strides in preventing dropout:

Figure 1: Annual Dropout Rates & Cohort Graduation Rates (Fall River Public Schools)
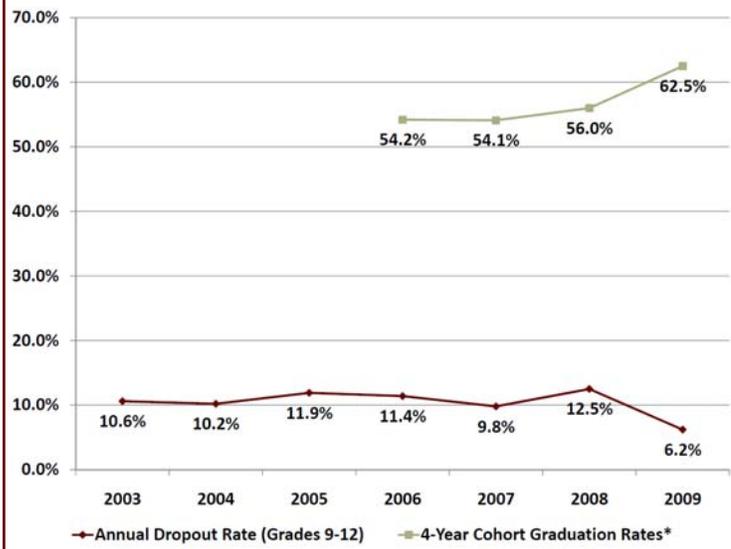
*Cohort graduation rates not calculated prior to 2005-06 school year.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education Elementary and Secondary Education, Fall River Student Indicators

Figure 2: 4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate by Student Group (2009)
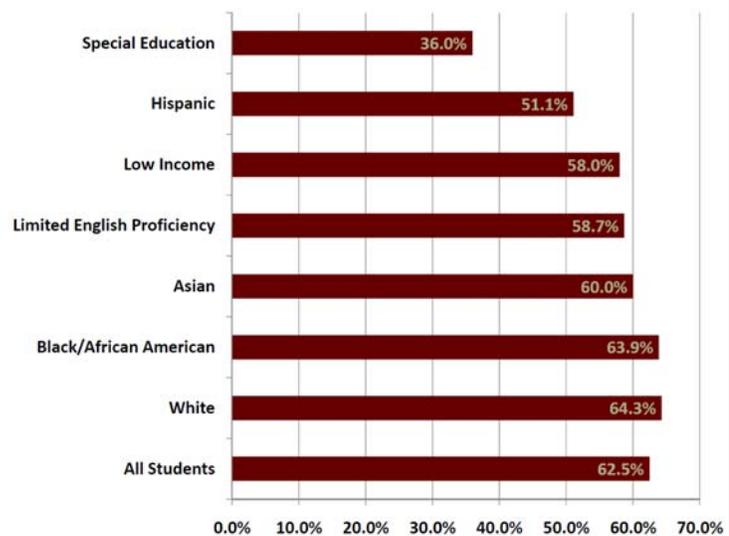
Source: Massachusetts Department of Education Elementary and Secondary Education, Fall River Cohort 2009 Graduation Rates

I. Leadership, Governance, and Systemic Issues

- Continue to prioritize dropout prevention.
- Determine the degree to which leadership and personnel are capable of addressing the challenge of dropout prevention.
- Embrace the student-centered philosophy of Durfee High School and encourage this culture at other schools.

- Ensure that policies regarding attendance, retention, and discipline are consistent within and across the district.
- Improve communication between the middle schools and the high school.
- Reinforce the connection between students' education and their futures.

II. **Expand collaborations with community organizations and the juvenile justice system.**

III. **Improve safety in the neighborhoods surrounding schools, with particular emphasis on before and after school hours.**

IV. **Improve Family Engagement**

V. **Curriculum and Teaching Strategies**

- Integrate literacy into all course subjects and student activities.
- Expand service learning opportunities for all students.
- Train more teachers in active learning strategies.
- Establish a uniform curriculum across all subjects and grade levels.

VI. **Individualized Instruction and Support**

- Support and sustain current success with ELL program at Durfee High School.
- Identify at-risk students and conduct risk assessments as early as possible.
- Expand opportunities to discuss career development with students.
- Increase the number of onsite programs to students in need of wraparound services.
- Provide additional time for teachers and staff to meet and discuss strategies for addressing the needs of at-risk students.
- Continue to find ways to make the size of Durfee High School more manageable and less intimidating.
- Expand opportunities in career and technical education at the high school by creating more career pathways.

VII. **Staffing**

- Increase the number of: ELL certified teachers, adjustment counselors, truant officers, and reading specialists.
- Hire graduation coaches and retrieval specialists.
- Continue efforts to diversify the district's faculty and staff to better reflect the composition of the student population.

VIII. **Alternative Programming**

- Institutionalize the success of Resiliency Prep and its associated alternative pathways both organizationally and financially.
- Expand opportunities for credit recovery.
- Restructure and expand High School Now.
- Provide more alternative options for middle school students.

IX. **Professional Development**

- Help teachers develop the skills and understanding needed to help them relate to Fall River's students.
- Educate teachers on ways to incorporate technology into the classroom.
- Help teachers manage the classroom more effectively.
- Encourage teachers to develop strategies for connecting students' academic experiences to their futures.

X. **Early Identification Systems**

- Expand efforts to identify students at risk for dropping out as early as possible.
- Pursue grant opportunities and collaborations that will assist in the creation of a Dropout Early Warning System.
- Improve the ways in which information on at-risk students is shared with and among teachers and staff.
- Create protocols for identifying at-risk students and intervening with those at greatest risk for dropping out.

XI. **Pursue funding opportunities to ensure the sustainability of dropout prevention efforts.**

Introduction

In January 2010, the leadership of Fall River Public Schools (FRPS) engaged the Urban Initiative at UMass Dartmouth to conduct an external evaluation of the school district's dropout prevention programming. The goals of this evaluation were to assess current dropout prevention activities, discover areas in which a duplication of effort is taking place, identify potential gaps in the provision of services to students, and provide recommendations based on data collection, analysis, and nationally recognized best practices that will help the district enhance student learning and improve graduation rates.

UMass Dartmouth's Urban Initiative is uniquely qualified to conduct this evaluation: not only is it the first national satellite of the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) at Clemson University, but it has also become well-versed in the challenges faced by Fall River through its landmark 2009 report, "Dropout Prevention in the SouthCoast: Choosing a New Path to Economic Prosperity".

Using research-based strategies and methods defined by the NDPC, the Urban Initiative undertook a Dropout Prevention Program Assessment to provide the Fall River Public Schools with a platform from which to base a long-term strategic plan for combating dropout. These methods included an analysis of data provided by both the district and the state, interviews with educational stakeholders (district and school leaders, teachers, support staff, and students), and observations of learning conditions in individual classrooms.

It must be emphasized that this assessment is only a snapshot of current district and school policies and practices and does not offer an in-depth, longitudinal assessment of factors influencing dropout rates. Nevertheless, as an institution devoted to research, program evaluation, and technical assistance in the areas of urban and education policy, the Urban Initiative is confident that its findings are reliable and valid and will give the FRPS important tools for building its capacity for self-directed, continuous improvement.

Research Methods, Validity, and Limitations

The Urban Initiative's Dropout Prevention Program Assessment, which is modeled on the National Dropout Prevention Center's Program Assessment and Review process, consists of several phases: 1) preparation; 2) data review and analysis; 3) school site visits; 4) review and analysis of school visit data; 5) report and discussion (contained herein); 6) action planning; and 7) implementing an action plan. The goal of this project is for the Urban Initiative to produce a report and a set of recommendations that will allow the FRPS to engage in action planning and implementation of strategies to reduce dropout rates. In order to provide recommendations that address the particular needs of Fall River and have the highest likelihood of producing positive results, the Urban Initiative conducted a review of nationally-recognized scholarly research relative to dropout prevention best practices that have improved graduation rates at schools throughout the country.

In order to affirm the validity of the results presented herein, efforts were made to ensure that each finding was corroborated by information from at least three independent sources. For the study of the FRPS, most of the information gathered was of a qualitative nature, derived primarily from interviews supported by on-site observations. To the extent possible, the Urban Initiative supported qualitative findings with quantitative data gathered from both the school district and sources provided by the state. This data included statistics on demographics, test scores, attendance, student mobility, and dropout rates.

A note about the calculation of dropout rates: under the No Child Left Behind Act, states are now required to report a four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate that reflects "the number of students who entered high school four years earlier (adjusting for transfers in and out, émigrés, and deceased students) and earn a regular high school diploma at the end of their fourth year, before the end of their fourth year, or during a summer session immediately following their fourth year."[1] States are also given the option to report five-year adjusted cohort graduation rates to account for students graduating within five years of beginning high school. In Massachusetts, the process for tracking students and producing accurate rates is facilitated through Student Information Management Systems (SIMS), which monitors the enrollment status of every student in the state to flag instances where students transfer to other in-state public schools or enroll in GED programs and are thus not counted as dropouts. In addition to the cohort rate, Massachusetts uses an annual dropout rate to measure the percentage of high school students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the

next without earning a diploma or equivalent degree. Both annual and cohort rates are presented in this report where appropriate.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

The National Dropout Prevention Center has long asserted that a student's choice to drop out is not only caused by factors encountered in the school environment; it is also significantly influenced by variables beyond school grounds. This is corroborated by a growing body of research that strongly correlates socioeconomic characteristics like poverty, low adult educational attainment, and high unemployment with higher dropout rates.[2] Indeed, most of the Urban Initiative's discussions with school administrators, teachers, and students highlighted the prevalence of obstacles students face at home and in their neighborhoods that stand in the way of academic success and, ultimately, graduation.

Economic Factors. The city of Fall River is facing many of the same challenges as other post-industrial cities across the state and nation, challenges which have been exacerbated by the recent economic downturn. Its name is synonymous with the mills whose smokestacks still pepper the skyline, though the jobs those factories once provided have long since departed. Between 2001 and 2007, the state lost 93,300 manufacturing jobs, representing a 24 percent decline. Over 5 percent of those job losses were felt in Fall River alone, with the city shedding 4,972 positions during those years.[3] These losses, compounded by the effects of the current recession on other industries, helped push the city's unemployment rate to a high of 18.3 percent in January 2010 and an average of 14.8 percent for the entire year.[4] In comparison, the statewide unemployment rate for December 2010 was just 8.2 percent. (**See Figure 3**.)

Even among those employed, economic hardship is still prevalent: per capita income stands at $20,024, compared to

Figure 3: Annual, Unadjusted Unemployment Rates (2006 - 2010)
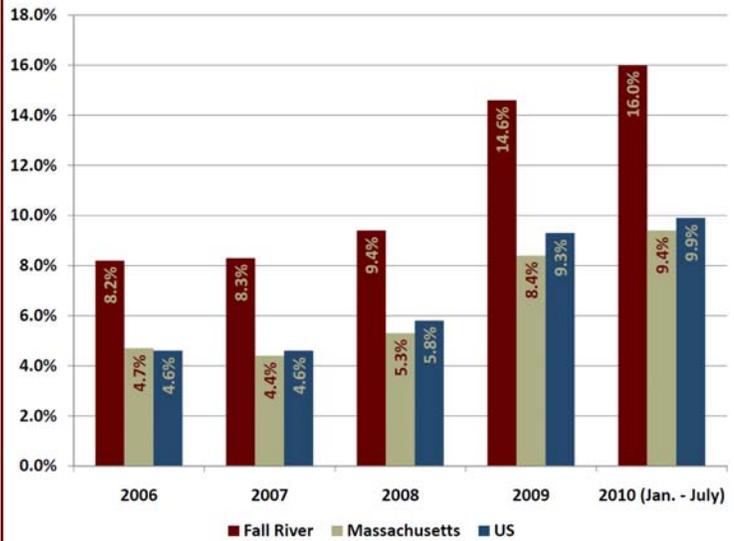
Source: Massachusetts Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development (EOLWD), Labor Force & Unemployment Data. Accessed at http://lmi2.detma.org/lmi/lmi_lur_a.asp.

Figure 4: Educational Attainment in Fall River (Adult Population, 25 Years and Older)
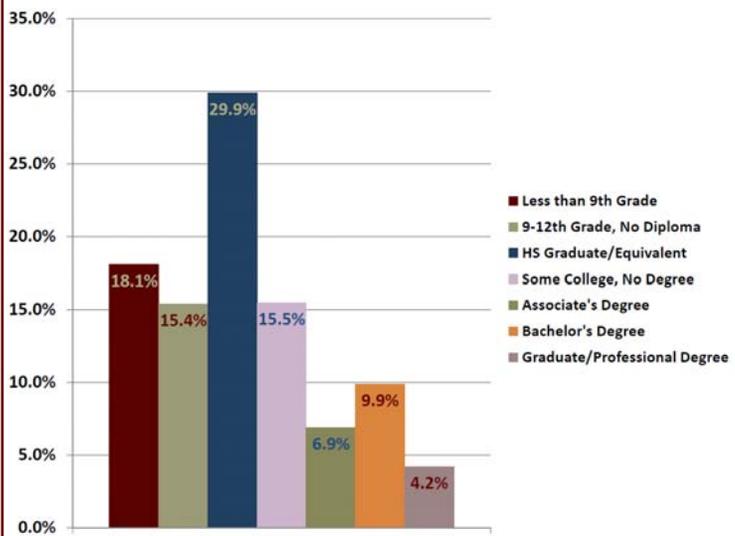
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006-2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates, Selected Social Characteristics, Fall River, MA.

$33,806 statewide.[5] Among the 37,106 households in the city, 37.1 percent earned less than $25,000 in 2008, with 20.7 percent of this group earning less than $15,000. More than one quarter (26.6 percent) of the city's youth live in poverty, which represents 23,565 children under 18. Like many cities, Fall River has neighborhoods where the circumstances are even worse: for example, over 40 percent of residents in five particular census block groups (mostly

in the south end of the city) live below the poverty level, less than 5 percent of residents in another block groups (mostly in the north end of the city) fit this category.[6] The city's elementary schools are marked by similar extremes: while 74.6 percent of all FRPS students are classified as low income, over 90 percent of the student populations at two elementary schools (Doran and Watson) are designated as such. As a significant body of research has shown, poverty is one of the strongest non-school indicators of high dropout risk.[7]

Educational Attainment. Another warning sign of risk for school dropout is a low level of educational attainment within students' families and communities. This factor is often correlated with student success, even when controlling for race or ethnicity.[8] On this indicator, Fall River is once again far below the state average: among city residents over the age of 25, 33.5 percent never earned a high school diploma or equivalent (versus 11.6 percent statewide; see **Figure 4**.) In three of the city's census block groups, more than 65 percent of adult residents failed to complete high school.[9] When so many students have family members and neighbors who failed to complete high school themselves, students perceive dropping out as acceptable, or even inevitable. Meanwhile, only 14.1 percent of Fall River's adults hold a Bachelor's degree or higher (compared to 37.7 percent statewide), which means students have access to very few adults who can demonstrate the value of attending and completing college.[10]

Low educational attainment can also affect parental attitudes toward school and their perceived capacity to provide academic support, which in turn may hinder the success of their children. Research has shown that when a parent shows little or no interest in their child's performance at school or holds low expectations for that child's educational future, the student is more likely to drop out.[11] Parents may also feel incapable of supporting academic achievement because their limited schooling may render them unable to assist with assignments.

Figure 5: Demographic Shifts in Fall River (1990 - 2008)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Summary and 2006-2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates
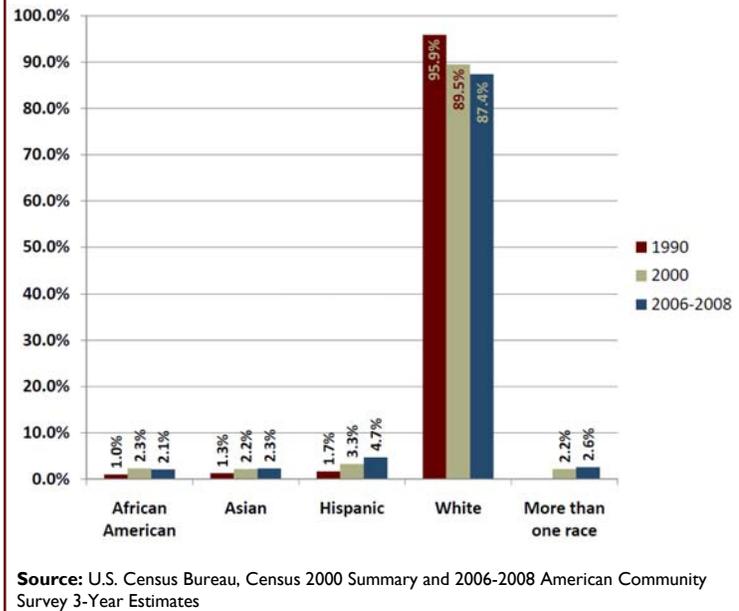
Diversity. Like many cities of its size throughout the state, Fall River is a melting pot of ethnicities, cultures, and languages. And while exposure to such diversity has the capacity to strengthen every student's educational experience, the ever-shifting makeup of the city presents several challenges to teachers, administrators, students, and parents who are working to support students' academic achievement. As **Figure 5** demonstrates, Fall River is becoming a more diverse city. For example, over 97 percent of city residents identified themselves as White in the 1990 U.S. Census. That figure has dropped by more than 10 percent in less than two decades.

Interestingly, the diversity among students enrolled in FRPS is far greater than that of the city's population (see **Figure 6**). While this data demonstrates similar trends—a decrease in the proportion of residents identified as white and an increase among those of Hispanic origin—the demographic change has been particularly pronounced over the past decade in the city's schools (see **Figure 7**.)

Among teachers, language barriers were cited as one of the most significant challenges in addressing student needs and communicating effectively with families. For the current school year (2010-2011), nearly one quarter of the student population (23.8 percent) has a first language other than English, and 5.4 percent are characterized as being "limited English proficient."[12] According to census data, 32.9 percent of city residents reportedly speak a language other than English at home, with a majority (27 percent) speaking an Indo-European language (likely Spanish or Portuguese). Among those respondents, 10.3 percent speak English "less than very well." Meanwhile, the population of Hispanic students in the FRPS has grown by 10.6 percent in the past decade alone, signaling a trend that will likely present further obstacles to

Figure 6: Comparison of Diversity
(City Population vs. Study Body)
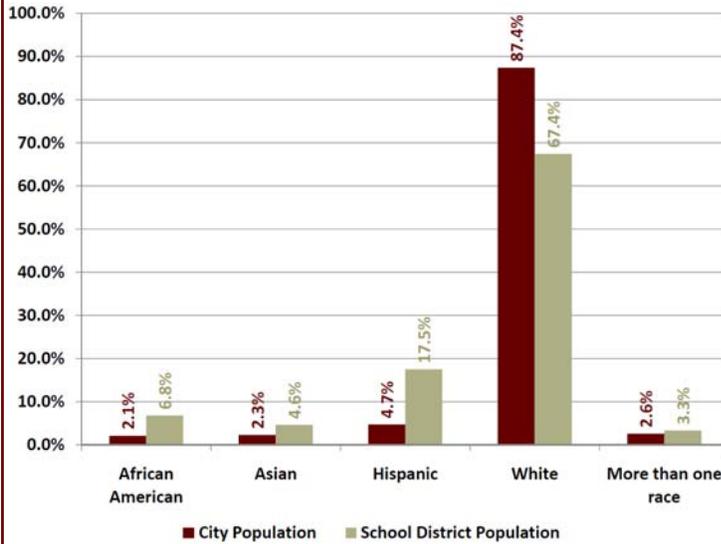
Source: Massachusetts Department of Education Elementary and Secondary Education, Fall River Student Enrollment Data, 2010-2011; 2006-2008 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates

Figure 7: Fall River Public Schools Student Demographics
(2000 - 2010)
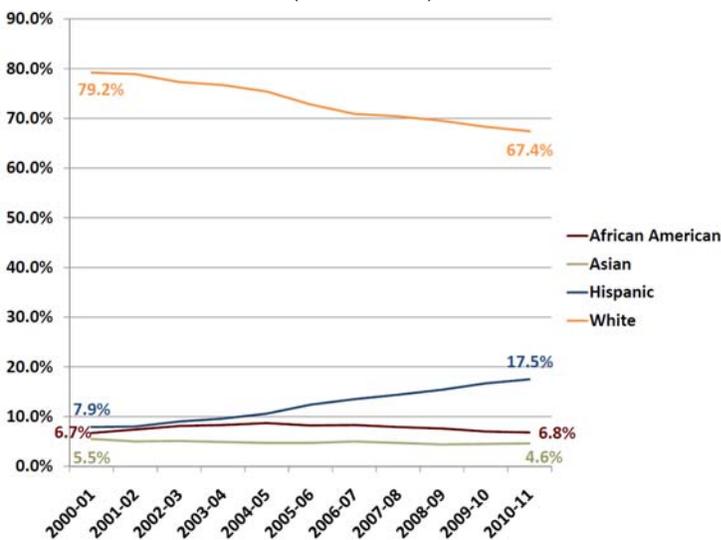
Source: Massachusetts Department of Education Elementary and Secondary Education, Fall River Student Enrollment Data

the ability of teachers and administrators to communicate with students and their families.

Cultural norms and expectations can also affect the degree to which students and their families value education, which in turn can affect one's decision to drop out of school. The financial pressures facing struggling families may cause them to place a

higher premium on income-generating jobs in the short-term rather than encouraging longer-term investments in educational achievement.

Fall River is considered a "Gateway City" in part because of the high volume of immigrants who have made Fall River their home—18.8 percent of the city's population is foreign born, with 18.7 percent of that group entering the country in the past ten years alone. Yet these numbers only reflect documented immigrants. Like most of its peer cities, Fall River has had a significant population of undocumented immigrants, including many children enrolled in city schools. While the school system is not allowed to question a student's immigration status or that of their family, many parents fear that their participation in school activities might result in their being reported to federal immigration officials. Not only is family engagement inhibited in these instances, but students whose families are here illegally face severely limited prospects: they are ineligible for federal financial aid and in-state tuition at public colleges, which essentially puts a low ceiling on their educational prospects and future employment opportunities. When unable to aspire to academic achievement beyond high school, students have a greater incentive to drop out and join the workforce.

Student Transience. Throughout the Urban Initiative's conversations with teachers and administrators, the high level of student mobility was repeatedly cited as both an obstacle to student achievement and a risk factor for dropping out. The statistics lend credence to these claims: during the 2008-2009 school year, Fall River had the second highest churn rate (22.9 percent) among school districts that have at least one of the state's 35 lowest-performing schools (categorized as Level 4). Student mobility, or churn rate, is the percentage of students who entered or left a school district between the first day of school in September and the last day in June of the following year. In 2010, Fall

River's churn rate was 15.8 percent. The churn rate for particular subgroups is even higher (**Figure 8**). Among students with limited English proficiency, the churn rate is 30.5 percent, while 17.2 percent of low-income students either entered or left the district during a single school year.

The tumult caused by a student changing schools during the year can significantly hinder academic achievement and thus increase the risk of dropping out. These students do not only face potential difficulties in assimilating to the new curriculum and coursework, but they also leave behind relationships with teachers and fellow students that must be reestablished at their new schools. Finally, dropout prevention efforts are further limited because highly mobile students are difficult to track and assess for dropout risk factors.[13] The Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) has also found that students who change schools during the school year perform worse on MCAS than their peers.[14]

Teenage Pregnancy. Based on the most recent data available (2008), Fall River has the eighth highest teen pregnancy rate in Massachusetts. During that year, the birth rate for women ages 15-19 was 56.2 per 1,000.[15] And while this actually represents a 4.7 percent decrease from the prior year, there are nonetheless many young mothers who are faced with the competing pressures of parenting and completing school. Moreover, other data shows that Fall River's teen birth rate is unlikely to change dramatically: results from the 2008 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (the most recent year for which data was made available) show that 19.7 percent of middle school students reported having sexual intercourse at least once. Of this group, 7.4 percent reported not using contraception, placing them at risk for becoming pregnant and struggling academically as a result.

Drug and Alcohol Abuse. According to results of the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey of 2008, 35.9 percent of Fall River middle school students indicated

Figure 8: Mobility Rates - Fall River Public Schools 3 Year Average (2008 - 2010)
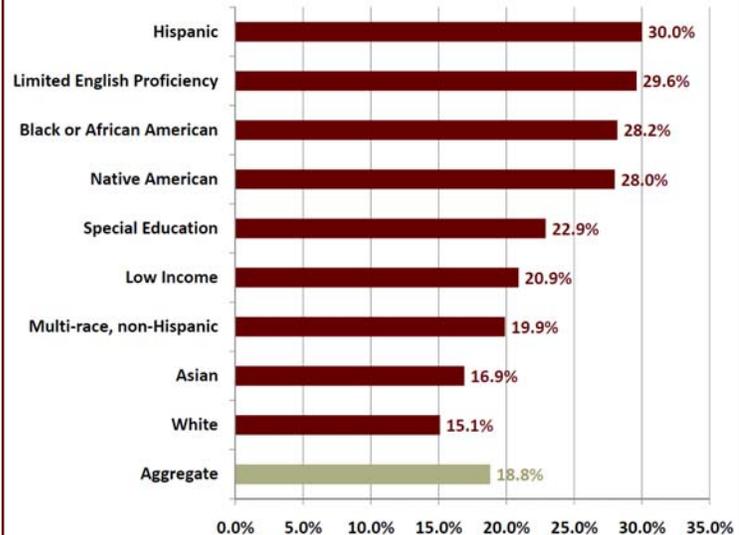
Source: Massachusetts Department of Education Elementary and Secondary Education, 2010 Fall River Mobility Rate

that they had tried alcohol, with 19 percent of this group reportedly consuming at least one alcoholic drink within the past 30 days. Meanwhile, 16.2 percent had tried marijuana at least once, and 11.1 percent of this group had used it during the past 30 days. When it came to other drugs, 5.6 percent reported having used cocaine, 14.9 percent attempted to get high through the use of inhalants, 3.3 percent used methamphetamines, and 3.1 percent injected illegal drugs.

Governance and Leadership

Overview

The research team, comprised of representatives from the National Dropout Prevention Center and the Urban Initiative, met with key leaders from the Fall River Public Schools, including the superintendent, assistant superintendent, principals, and senior instructional staff. The questions posed revolved around the district and school improvement plans, issues related to the dropout problem, and intervention strategies employed to bolster graduation rates.

Findings

A. Strengths

- The district leadership demonstrates a strong commitment to dropout prevention. This is evidenced by not just the commissioning of this study, but also the leadership's support for programming and the new philosophical direction taken by Durfee High School.

- New programs, plans for the future, and community partnerships demonstrate openness to innovation and creativity.
- The FRPS pursuit of grants for the purpose of evaluating and implementing dropout prevention programming, such as the state and federal High School Graduation Initiative, is commendable and indicative of genuine interest in raising graduation rates.
- The district has made marked progress on the use of management information systems at all levels.
- An improved school website allows for increased family engagement.

B. Challenges

- There exists a lack of clarity as well as room for improvement regarding data sharing, integration, and protocols.
- Significant gaps in manpower in some areas are evident. For example, one adjustment counselor serves 600 students.
- Truant officers appear to be overwhelmed.
- Teachers in some schools cited the limited availability of technology and a lack of face time with fellow staff members.
- No universal retention policy exists, resulting in a great deal of confusion even at the highest levels of leadership.
- District-wide roadblocks to parental engagement exist, such as the absence of teacher/staff contact information on the website and the fact that student handbooks are produced in English only.

MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Overview

There are four middle schools in the Fall River Public School district: Matthew J. Kuss, Henry Lord, James Madison Morton, and Edmund P. Talbot, each serving a distinct quarter of the city. While there was not sufficient time to gain an understanding of the culture and climate at each individual middle school, the research team uncovered important findings regarding dropout risk within and across these four middle schools. The evaluation included site visits and interviews with teachers, staff, and principals.

Findings

A. Strengths

- Student risk assessments are conducted and incorporate in-school and external influences; the process helps connect students with community organizations (SMILES, LEADS) that can provide additional support.
- Curriculum Accommodation Teams are in place to establish improvement plans for struggling students, which can limit the need for retention.
- Discussions on retention policy are happening, as evidenced by a committee formed to tackle the subject during the last school year.
- Several schools have begun developing career portfolios to focus students on planning for the future and setting goals.
- Morton employs a Youth Court program to address disciplinary issues. This year, the school plans to add an enrichment period to the school day that will offer various electives.
- Kuss cited at least six agencies providing counseling services for students and families.
- Kuss also sends reading and math coaches to feeder elementary schools to identify gaps in the curriculum and places where adjustments can be made to support students' readiness for middle school.
- Kuss and Henry Lord both employ small learning communities.
- Talbot has several extracurricular programs to reinforce learning, including Pinnacle Tutoring, Boston Learning Club, and a tutoring/ homework club.

B. Challenges

- Not enough slots in the alternative middle school program (at Resiliency Prep) exist for students having difficulty with the traditional school setting. Additionally, when students are expelled, they often return to their original school upon court adjudication because there is no other place for them.
- Retention policies vary widely by school.
- Teachers are frustrated by the lack of a consistent, uniform curriculum.
- When students repeat 8th grade, their experiences are identical to those of the

previous year, essentially replicating the conditions under which they previously failed.

- The identification of students as being at-risk appears subjective and is not consistently reflective of research-based dropout risk factors.

- Once students are identified as "at-risk," teachers/staff feel there are few interventions available for them to employ.

- Student mobility presents a particular challenge to teachers.

- Teachers feel students are coming to middle school unprepared both academically and socially.

- According to staff, the seven-period schedule makes fostering relationships and meeting students' emotional needs difficult.

- Staff members expressed that not all students feel safe, particularly before and after school.

- Communication problems between the middle schools and Durfee High School were cited repeatedly.

- It was noted that middle schools sometimes withhold certain information on students in order to give them a "fresh start" in high school.

- Many students have negative impressions of Durfee and are intimidated by its size.

- Staff members report that there is a significant need for positive role models for middle school students.

- Staff cited a need for more Spanish-speaking staff who can communicate with parents they are currently unable to reach.

- Because it is not a Title I school, Morton Middle School has less ability to meet the needs of certain groups of at-risk students.

- Teachers feel that students perceive summer school as an easy fix to reverse failure during the school year, so for many there is no incentive to work diligently.

- Discipline is inconsistent in some middle schools and staff often feel overwhelmed when trying to address behavior issues.

- Many students are prescribed medication to control their behavior, but teachers and staff have found that when its administration by parents is inconsistent, students require more disciplinary action.

- Limited resources result in counselors having to perform triage, meaning they often cannot employ measures aimed at the prevention of disciplinary problems.

- Few support services are available for students who face problems at home.

- Teachers and administrators cited a growing number of mental health hospitalizations among students.

DURFEE HIGH SCHOOL

Overview

The research team met with administrators, teachers, and students at Durfee High School and also conducted observations of classroom teaching and the overall school environment.

Findings

A. Strengths

- The current administration demonstrates commitment to a student-focused environment, versus one that emphasizes rules and policies first. This is an excellent approach to increasing graduation rates among urban students.

- The administration was also cited as being very supportive of staff developing relationships with students.

- Students feel that the school is very open to diversity and cultural differences.

- Students, teachers, and administrators seem to feel safe at school.

- Pregnant and parenting students feel welcomed.

- There is a visible increase in the level of school spirit.

- Students are pleased with the number and variety of offerings made available to them and they feel that their interests are met sufficiently. Indeed, there are more extracurricular activities than ever before.

- Teachers feel they set high expectations for their students.

- Some small-scale attempts at small learning communities have been successful.

- School administrators supervise lunch periods, which results in positive interaction and relationship-building with students.
- There is evidence of teachers incorporating technology creatively and successfully.
- A new program in partnership with BCC is helping students obtain vocational credentials before graduation.
- The Bridge software program helps students make connections between education and earnings in various careers.
- Some service learning opportunities are available through the Peaceful Coalition.
- An English MCAS specialist has been added to the faculty to help students with composition and writing.
- The school's parent center has staff members who speak Spanish and Khmer, helping the school better reach growing immigrant populations in the city.
- A special education parent advisory group has recently formed to increase the level of parental engagement.
- Open houses and an orientation night are offered to entering freshmen and their families.
- There are new opportunities being created for students and staff to interact outside the classroom; many faculty members are taking advantage of these opportunities with support from the school administration.
- There was a significant increase in the number of Advanced Placement qualifying exams taken by Durfee students, with 347 exams taken in 2010, almost twice the number of the prior year.

B Mixed Results

- Students perceive the rules to be flexible. In some instances, this can be problematic: students may exploit this flexibility, or they may perceive a lack of fairness in how rules are applied to themselves and their peers. On the other hand, this demonstrates the school's commitment to a less rigid, more student-centered approach that makes accommodations for factors that may be beyond a student's control. For example, there is no clear attendance policy, in part because administrators recognize that some students face external pressures like being responsible for taking their siblings to school or having to rely on public transportation, which could make tardiness a frequent occurrence. DHS leaders seem to recognize that disciplinary actions may only add an incentive for students to stay home from school altogether, rather than arrive late.
- Classroom observations revealed that students are being exposed to both very positive and negative learning experiences. Some teachers appeared to be inspiring and engaging, while others demonstrated no attempt to stray beyond a traditional lecturing format to keep their students interested and engaged.
- Many students interviewed reported that high school was much easier than they anticipated. This may be a result of lower expectations than those students faced in middle school, or the possibility that students are not being sufficiently challenged. It may also be that, students have received sufficient support to have allayed their initial fears about the difficult of high school. While these factors go beyond the scope of this report, this may have a positive influence on dropout risk. Students who feel they can capably manage their schoolwork without being overwhelmed are at a lower risk for academic failure, which is one of the strongest influences on a decision to drop out.
- Some vocational/technical education options are available to students at DHS through the Durfee Discovery program. However, the vocational program/career programming is still in its early stages of restructuring and will continue to require expansion and altering to sufficiently meet the needs of all students.
- Student data is updated and shared quarterly, which helps identify problems and dropout risk more quickly. However, teachers and administrators have difficulty making time to incorporate the data and accessing strategies that will help them address these problems.
- The availability of technology varies across the campus and some students indicated a lack of access to certain items in certain programs. However, the school is in the process of a major upgrade in technology that will include a computer laboratory in each department and an expansion of internet access.

C. Challenges

- In general, the school still suffers from negative perceptions in the community. These perceptions are often manifest in the considerable number of gifted and talented students who choose to attend Diman Regional Vocational Technical High School instead of Durfee.

- Many middle school students are intimidated by the size of DHS and are often overwhelmed when they begin freshman year.

- The attendance policy is unclear for many students.

- Administrators and teachers noted that the school has difficulty recruiting diverse faculty and staff members that better reflect the composition of the student body.

- Both teachers and students are frustrated with the policy that classifies all students as being on a college track. Students with no college aspirations see little relevance in some of their coursework, while students who do plan to attend college report feeling held back by some of their classmates.

- Only one reading teacher is available to serve the literacy needs of the entire student population. There doesn't appear to be a belief that all teachers may have some responsibility to incorporate literacy in their content areas.

- It appears that there is very little use of service learning as a teaching strategy.

- Guidance counselors report that students often do not see a connection between education and their future.

- There is only one bilingual guidance counselor, which presents a barrier between school staff and parents.

- Guidance counselors report that too little experiential learning is taking place, and that teachers rely too heavily on handouts and lectures.

- Teachers feel that they have no resources to help them relate to their students, and that the size of the school only makes it more difficult to build relationships.

- Teachers note that many students arrive at DHS below grade level and have difficulty with homework assignments. Many also cited the prevalence of very limited attention spans.

- According to teachers, students often come to class unprepared to learn, say teachers.

- Teachers and administrators reported that students were generally up to two years behind in math, and they cited especially high failure rates for Algebra II (approximately 40 percent fail College Prep Algebra II and 22 percent fail Honors Algebra II).

- Considerable time is spent on tutoring near MCAS testing dates because students are still unprepared to test.

- Teachers feel that many students are being pushed through the system, which allows them to advance grades while remaining at lower competency levels. This can set students up for considerable failure, especially when they are confronted with the challenge of passing MCAS.

- Many students are beginning high school at age 15 or 16, already close to or at the point where they may elect to drop out.

- Another major dropout risk factor is retention, and it was noted that 16 percent of students arrive at DHS having already been retained in middle and/or elementary school.

- Teachers, students, and staff agree that more career conversations need to be taking place and that more career-related options should be offered in school.

- Many students exhibit confidence problems, according to faculty and staff interviews. This limits students' efforts at taking risks academically.

- Many students perceive problems with classroom management, saying that some teachers are reluctant to refer problems to vice principals because teachers believe their decisions may go unsupported and that students will be sent back to class.

- Students also perceive problems with the availability of resources and technology. For example, it was noted in an interview that large groups of students had to share the few calculators a particular class had available.

- Students feel that their peers need more support managing their anger and behavior.

- Some areas of the school, particularly remote areas, were perceived to be less safe than others.

- It was reported that many teachers are reluctant to assert their authority in the classroom, leading to disciplinary problems.

- Similarly, teachers are sometimes reluctant to refer disciplinary problems to principals for fear of appearing incapable of addressing them.

- Students feel that bullying is a problem, yet they are afraid to draw attention to the issue.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS PROGRAM

Overview

Using funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), Fall River established a new position dedicated to the needs of students classified as English Language Learners (ELL). The ELL counselor performs dual roles by providing academic support as well as serving as a retention specialist who keeps close track of student contact information and dropout risk factors. It is evident that the creation of this program has been tremendously successful overall, not only because of the many ways in which the counselor targets dropout risk factors, but also because of the already impressive success rate: since the position was created, the graduation rate for ELL students has risen by 20 percent.

Despite this, external factors present some of the most significant challenges to the success of this program. It is believed that many of the ELL students at Durfee High School are undocumented immigrants, dimming these students' prospects for post-secondary education. Additionally, it was reported that many ELL students hail from Puerto Rico and that their families make frequent trips home, which significantly disrupts their academic progress.

Findings

A. Strengths

- The ELL counselor has successfully advocated for policy changes that have improved outcomes for ELL students.

- This counselor is undoubtedly an excellent fit for the position.

- ELL students once received a certificate of achievement, but expectations have been raised so that each student's goal is to earn a high school diploma.

- Students receive two hours of ESL instruction per day, and they are grouped in classes according to proficiency. Such groupings have been very successful.

- The number of ELL-certified teachers has increased and they work well together.

- An award system was implemented to motivate students and foster a sense of accomplishment.

- ELL students are now more integrated into the mainstream, which gives them improved connections with teachers and the rest of the school.

- There is a new ELL MCAS class to give more focused preparation to these students.

- The program now has a curriculum and books to accompany it. This was not the case before the new position was added.

- The ELL counselor reported high levels of support from leaders at the high school and district levels.

- An ELL Parent Committee was recently established to foster more family engagement.

- A new "language mentor" program has begun, matching sophomores with Bristol Community College students who speak their native language.

- A 'Connecting Cultures Club' has been started, engaging ELL students in an extracurricular activity.

- While there are usually seven or eight pregnancies per year among ELL students, this number was reduced to just one in the 2009-2010 school year.

B. Challenges

- The ELL counselor position was financed by an ARRA grant, which suggests that funding may not be available in future years.

- There is still a great need for more ELL-certified teachers.

- Many ELL students are not identified early enough to ensure their particular learning needs are addressed in a timely fashion.

- ELL students who need to join the workforce are not always aware of alternative ways to continue their education. The district needs to do redouble efforts to promote these pathways.

- There is no transition program for ELL students moving from middle to high school.

- At the middle school level, there is only one ELL teacher at Talbot Middle School, despite the importance of the middle school years for ELL students. (A middle school-wide ELL program was dismantled two years ago.)

- While a dual enrollment program with BCC encourages ELL students to participate in more rigorous coursework, a 3.0 GPA requirement renders many students who might benefit from this opportunity ineligible for participation.

ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS AT RESILIENCY PREPARATORY SCHOOL

Overview

In order to address the needs of students who require an alternative to traditional schooling, FRPS offers programs at Resiliency Prep for middle and high school-aged students, although most participants are high school-aged. Resiliency Prep features a credit recovery program, afternoon and evening options for working students, and two on-site, student-run businesses. Under a trimester system, the credit recovery program allows students to earn credit for a year-long course in just 12 weeks. Durfee Academy, which provides nontraditional school hours for working students, began in the 2006-2007 school year and offers courses from 3:00 to 7:00 PM. The school receives an average of 8-10 referrals per week from Durfee.

Findings

A. Strengths

- Teachers are being trained in conducting online courses, which signals a shift toward enhanced integration of technology to support student achievement.

- More students are staying enrolled in the school than ever before.

- Teachers and staff devote time to building relationships with students.

- Students are grouped in cohorts, improving their interpersonal relationships and accountability.

- The school is in the process of combining Durfee Academy and the credit recovery program, which will result in the school being open from 7:00 AM until 9:00 PM.

- A Saturday tutoring center is being added.

- Resiliency Prep (and the alternate pathways associated with it) has benefited from dynamic, creative leadership that espouses a student-centered philosophy.

B. Challenges

- Guidance counselors at Durfee High School feel that the alternative school is only keeping students in school and that more actual credit recovery needs to be happening.

- Attendance is a perennial problem.

- Graduation rates are still tremendously low in the alternative program.

- The capacity to serve ELL students is very limited.

- The school has no reading teacher, and the current teachers lack the training to teach reading themselves.

- The credit recovery program has too few slots available for students.

- Students are currently unable to participate in credit recovery programs for some subjects while earning regular credit in others. This will likely be remedied by the addition of online courses.

- The sustainability of Resiliency Prep, alternate pathways, and credit recovery programs could be considered questionable because they are currently driven primarily by individual leadership and are funded through a variety of sources. It is not clear that the organizational and funding structures are fully institutionalized, so these factors are likely susceptible to sudden changes which could endanger programming.

HIGH SCHOOL NOW

Overview

High School Now is a transition program for over-age students who seek to enter Durfee High School despite an insufficient number of credits. The program takes place across five weeks during the summer before students plan to enter 9th grade, and offers an alternative to repeating the 8th grade for students who would be much older than their classmates.

Findings

Very little information about this program was uncovered during site visits, interviews, and data review. However, some complaints were made at the middle school level regarding this program. First, middle school teachers and staff felt the program was designed and implemented without their input or any consideration of their needs (such as scheduling and the demands of MCAS). In addition, many felt that once students know they will be participating in the program, they have no incentive to work hard during the last few weeks of middle school.

SMILES MENTORING PROGRAM

Overview

SMILES Mentoring is a non-profit organization in existence since 2003, and the organization has been working with the FRPS since 2007. Each year, SMILES matches over 200 at-risk students with volunteer mentors through fifteen different school-based programs. Mentors work with students at all grade levels, though programs in the elementary grades have a special emphasis on literacy. Meanwhile, high school mentoring relationships are much more individualized to meet the needs of mentees.

While SMILES is not a FRPS program, this collaboration is an important part of the district's overall dropout prevention strategy and thus merits discussion and analysis in this report.

Findings

Because the first cohort of SMILES mentees is still two years away from high school graduation, it is difficult to analyze the program's impact on dropout prevention. However, the program has done some preliminary analysis that includes tracking participant data related to research-based dropout risk factors (including literacy and attendance rates); the results of this analysis suggest that the program is having a positive impact on these students. Furthermore, recent surveys of mentors and mentees in the program indicate that all participants feel very positive about the program and its effects. It has also been reported that SMILES mentors have become advocates for the school district on a broad array of issues. This evidence is a reflection of the reason why mentoring is one of the fifteen research-based dropout prevention strategies recommended by the National Dropout Prevention Center.

A. Strengths

- The SMILES program is largely funded through private sources generated outside the district budget, offering the FRPS a low-cost strategy with a high-end result.
- The SMILES program encompasses two research-based strategies for dropout prevention, including both mentoring and early literacy development.
- Research conducted by the Urban Initiative identified mentoring as being highly effective in preventing dropout for the profile of at-risk students in the FRPS.
- The scope of programs across the district is substantial and comprehensive.

B. Challenges

- The collaboration with SMILES is dependent on the long-term viability of a non-profit organization; this leaves the district vulnerable to a potential sudden loss of an important strategy.
- While the district's leadership and many school leaders have been very supportive of the SMILES partnership, the program has been met by some staff with resistance and lack of understanding. Specifically, some teachers see a student's removal from class time as an intrusion.

LEADS SERVICE LEARNING PROGRAM

Overview

LEADS (Leadership for Educational Attainment Developed Through Service) is a collaboration between the Center for Civic Engagement at UMass Dartmouth, Bristol Community College, and the Fall River Public Schools. Part of the Commonwealth Corps program, LEADS is funded by a grant from the Massachusetts Governors' office. Through LEADS, UMass Dartmouth students use service learning projects to teach leadership skills to FRPS middle school students. The goals of the program are to increase school and civic engagement, improve students' leadership abilities, and encourage an appreciation for the importance of educational attainment among participants.

During the course of the program, middle school students develop a service learning project that seeks to address the needs of their community. Once they have defined their project, the LEADS facilitators (undergraduates) create engaging activities that integrate leadership, communication, and teamwork skills. Children also learn about the importance of education and self-discovery through reflection.

Findings

A. Strengths

- LEADS aligns well with one of the NDPC's research-based strategies, which recommends the creation of meaningful service-learning opportunities for students.

- LEADS has the potential to be very effective with students who have a difficult time understanding the impact of their educational experience on their future. According to FRPS guidance staff, many students fit this description and stand to benefit from the mentoring and leadership skills this program provides.

B. Challenges

- As a grant-funded program, LEADS could be a time-limited project. FRPS needs to identify ways to incorporate the service-learning model more completely into its philosophy and learning pedagogy.

CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Overview

Durfee High School is attempting to revitalize its traditional vocational/career division with the creation of the Durfee Discovery program. While not designed specifically as a dropout prevention strategy, the research team included the program for analysis given its potential to play a central role in keeping Durfee students on track for graduation.

The program is designed to expose incoming freshmen to an array of vocational and technical courses and then give them an opportunity to choose a subject area that will be incorporated into their academic schedule beyond ninth grade.

Engagement in career and technical courses as part of the comprehensive high school experience can enhance a student's understanding of the connection between school and their future, providing greater motivation for academic success. An emphasis on career/technical education, particularly for at-risk students, is a recognized best practice and one of the fifteen research-based dropout prevention strategies recommended by the NDPC.

Findings

A. Strengths

- This program—and more importantly, the expanded availability of career and technical courses—is a very positive development. Still in its early stages, Durfee Discovery appears to offer students a richness of options that will help keep their academic careers interesting and relevant.

B. Challenges

- It is understood that the current program offerings are quite limited and do not include a broad array of career pathways.

- The program is not yet at the level where it could be considered universally available to all students at the high school.

OVERARCHING FINDINGS AND PREVAILING ISSUES

Five research-based themes, modeled on the NDPC's PAR process, directed the Urban Initiative's Dropout Prevention Program Assessment. These themes were established to reflect both school reform literature as well as best practices used in successful schools throughout the country. Major findings from this assessment are thus categorized by theme.

Theme 1: District and school philosophy, values, and a spirit of school improvement.

Most importantly, the school district and its community partners demonstrate a commitment to dropout prevention, which is critical to the success of any long-term strategies that may emerge following this assessment. This commitment reflects shared values and a spirit of improvement for the city schools.

Nevertheless, there is a lack of clarity on many policies that play a significant role in supporting student achievement and reducing dropout rates. First,

there is no district-wide policy on retention and the process through which a decision to retain a student is made. Many teachers criticized the prevalence of social promotion, which might be addressed more effectively under a comprehensive retention policy. The implementation of attendance and tardiness policies also varies both across the district and within individual schools. While the needs and non-school responsibilities of each student (such as caring for siblings, transportation challenges, and homelessness) necessitate some flexibility in these areas, schools must ensure that administrators, teachers, and students have a clear idea of the district's expectations.

Finally, there seems to be some conflict regarding the values and attitudes of the teaching staff, a likely result of disparities across teachers' ages and backgrounds. While younger teachers generally appear to value building relationships with students, it seems that many older teachers eschew this strategy and thus miss opportunities to both enhance student engagement and make the school environment more welcoming.

Theme 2: Leadership, staff resources, and professional development.

Leadership plays a vital role in setting the stage for success in schools and across the district. To be successful, dropout prevention efforts must be part of a prioritized philosophy rather than a collection of programs and interventions. Moreover, the words and actions of school and district leaders signal how important they believe dropout prevention to be.

The leaders of the Fall River Public Schools have shown that they are serious about sustaining progress in the area of dropout prevention, beginning with their decision to commission this project as a way to assess the impacts of their own actions and policies. They have also committed themselves to the pursuit of additional funding for systemic change that will lead to increased graduation rates.

The effectiveness of district leadership has been impacted by significant turnover in key positions over the last decade, including that of the superintendent. Such turnover has continued to present challenges resulting from the absence of a consistent vision over this period of time. The sustainability of progress in dropout prevention will largely be determined by the qualifications and capabilities of the current and future school personnel.

The Durfee High School administration appears to have gained stability with the addition of the current principal and his leadership team that was brought in almost five years ago. The principal and his team have actively and successfully begun to create a positive culture at the school, shaping an atmosphere that is student-focused. They have also been willing to review and adapt policies that have hindered student success in a number of areas. While there are improvements that still need to be made, the approach of the current leadership at B.M.C. Durfee High School has helped create a foundation for the continued success of students in pursuit of graduation.

The perception of professional development opportunities within the FRPS was not very positive, with most staff and faculty reporting that such options were limited. Many cited the need for more training on relationship-building, especially with high school students. Others felt they needed more support dealing with students' emotional and psychosocial issues.

Another universal finding was that schools are significantly under-resourced in certain professional job categories, especially guidance and adjustment counselors. More reading specialists and ELL-certified teachers are also needed, according to staff and teachers. Indeed, many teachers feel students are reading below grade level, and the size of Fall River's ELL population continues to grow. Finally, as is often the case in mid-sized urban schools, the diversity of the staff was not reflective of that of the student body.

Theme 3: Curriculum, instructional strategies, and assessment.

Within this theme, the FRPS can positively impact student achievement by adopting a uniform, district-wide, aligned curriculum and by encouraging the use of nontraditional teaching strategies for students in need of more personalized instruction. The absence of a uniform curriculum was a major complaint among middle school teachers and administrators the research team interviewed. This is also a contributing factor to varying levels of student preparedness. For example, math and reading coaches at Kuss Middle School have begun visiting elementary school classrooms to determine the roots of gaps in their students' knowledge. Yet a universal curriculum would ensure that all students at a particular grade level are exposed to the same material and that teachers have appropriate expectations for their students' competencies.

Regarding teaching strategies, the research team found through both observation and interviews with staff and students that many teachers were relying heavily on traditional teaching methods, presenting material through lectures and handouts and using little technology. Yet the effects of creative, engaging teaching strategies on students' enthusiasm and responsiveness were undeniable when observed in particular high school classrooms that were visited. When students are not engaged in the classroom, their dropout risk rises. This presents the FRPS with an opportunity to offer professional development in teaching strategies, multiple intelligences, and learning styles to improve the effectiveness of its instructors.

Meanwhile, the use of assessments is an area in which the FRPS is demonstrating improvement: formal risk assessments are being conducted for targeted students, and teams of teachers convene to identify strategies to provide necessary support. Still, there seems to be a lack of clarity and follow-through upon completion of these assessments that often results in a "hit or miss" approach to applying effective interventions. Likewise, there is no formal system in place to determine if the interventions are having the intended impact. The team also heard that many students are referred for a formal risk assessment too late in the process to allow for the system of assessment and intervention to be effective.

Theme 4: School, family, and community support structure for learning.

The Urban Initiative found many positive examples of the FRPS providing a positive support structure for learning. These included a new emphasis on ELL students at the high school, an approach which has contributed to considerable progress in student achievement and dropout prevention within that student population. There has also been a shift to a student-focused learning environment at Durfee High School. However, family engagement remains a major challenge, largely due to oft-cited language barriers that limit communication between schools and parents. Another barrier to student achievement is the dearth of positive role models at home for many students to inspire and motivate them. While this is remedied for those who participate in the SMILES mentoring program, many more students stand to benefit from the encouragement and support mentors can provide.

The research team also found areas in which the middle schools and Durfee High School can work together more effectively. Improved information-sharing will undoubtedly enhance the high school's ability to track students and quickly identify risk factors. Meanwhile, it is critical that these schools work together to create a formal transition program to help students progress from middle to high school more smoothly. Such a transition program is integral to reducing dropout rates: not only is the first year of high school pivotal for overall success, but it is also a year during which 40 percent of all dropouts in low-income schools will choose to leave school.[16]

The High School Now program has proven marginally effective as a transition program. However, this program only targets students who are academically far behind their peers. As such, High School now does too little to fill the great need for ensuring that at-risk eighth graders enter the more expansive high school environment ready to learn and succeed.

Finally, while it appears that Resiliency Prep and its components (the alternative day program, Durfee Academy, credit recovery, and evening school) have made considerable strides in bolstering student engagement and improving graduation rates, many teachers feel that these programs have limited capacities and must expand to include more middle school students.

Community engagement is an area in which there is room for improvement. While Fall River is home to many community-based organizations—a number of which already deliver services to students—the Urban Initiative found that there may be opportunities for these organizations to become more engaged in the schools themselves, and to do so will require more direction from the FRPS regarding how they become involved and what roles they might play. Additionally, while many students are court-involved, the court system plays a very limited role in students' education. Like all school districts, Fall River must try to address a wide range of student needs with limited resources. Improved collaboration with community organizations can effectively and efficiently fulfill those needs while reducing the burden on schools and their staff.

Theme 5: Adequate facilities, current technologies, and safe and orderly environments.

In general, facilities were observed to be adequate, though the locations of schools—especially Durfee, which is located in the city's far north end—present some transportation challenges to students and their parents. Students, teachers, and staff largely perceived schools to be safe. Still, it was reported that discipline policies at the high school level were inconsistent, and it appears that teachers need much more support in this area. Such perceived inconsistencies are not always negative if they result from a deliberately student-centered, common-sense approach. But if these inconsistencies result from different interpretations of policy, this is an issue school administrators must address. As for current technology, its availability varied widely even within individual schools. While the research team found a few examples of teachers successfully integrating technology in the classroom, there are many limitations to what teachers have access to and how well they can use it. This presents yet another opportunity for professional development to take place.

DISTRICT NEEDS AND SERVICE GAPS

I: A Comprehensive Dropout Early Warning System (DEWS)

The FRPS stands to benefit greatly from a comprehensive, data-driven, dropout early warning system. While it currently collects data based on a narrow set of at-risk indicators, the district could benefit from a formalized system that: 1) is tailored specifically to Fall River's student characteristics; 2) collects more types of data related to dropout risk factors; and 3) begins collecting longitudinal data in the elementary grades.

Such a system would facilitate the identification of students at risk for dropping out and also identify appropriate interventions for each student. To be most effective, such a system should be utilized for every student in the FRPS, including elementary-aged students, so that risk factors can be identified and addressed through appropriate interventions. Indeed, the dropout problem cannot be addressed solely through high school-level interventions. The process of student disengagement begins early and is predictable enough to merit investment in an early warning system.

The FRPS should carefully monitor developments at the state level, as an effort to create a statewide DEWS is currently underway. While this system would cost nothing and allow schools to identify students who are at the highest risk for dropping out, it is currently limited to eighth grade data and uses only three indicators. Fall River should thus seek funding sources that will allow the district to develop a DEWS that is customized to meet the needs of the school system and its students.

Additionally, whether it is a state or local system that is used, it appears that there needs to be a clearer protocol in place for the utilization of student identification data as it was not clear to the Urban Initiative that the information that is currently collected is used in an effective or systematic way.

Evidence of impact on dropout prevention: Dropout early warning systems have become the subject of greater interest to educators in the past several years. As schools have become more focused on reducing dropout, software has improved to better meet their data collection, analysis, and reporting needs. Research has demonstrated that schools can use attendance rates, behavior, and grades in math or English to predict future dropouts as early as the 6th grade.[17] Another study found that 63 percent of all students who repeated a grade in middle school would fail to earn a high school diploma.[18] Meanwhile, 9th graders who fail core subjects and do not get promoted will have an 85 percent chance of either failing to graduate on time or, for some, at all.[19]

II: Graduation Coaches

The hiring of graduation coaches is a particularly effective dropout prevention strategy when utilized in concert with the Dropout Early Warning System. Graduation coaches help to keep students on track to graduate by developing individualized graduation plans and working with students to encourage adherence to their plans. Part of this work involves building relationships with students and advocating for their needs; these components are especially critical in large schools like Durfee High School, where students can easily become disaffected. Coaches also work with teachers, administrators, parents, and social service providers to ensure students have the supports that they need.

Such a strategy would reflect the student-centered philosophy at Durfee High School, and it is likely to replicate the success Durfee has seen with the assignment of a counselor exclusively for the ELL population. If FRPS hired five graduation coaches and assigned fifty at-risk students to each, Durfee could see a profound effect on the academic futures—and graduation rates—on at least 250 students each year.

Evidence of impact on dropout prevention: Graduation coaches have been used to combat high dropout rates in Georgia since 2005, and the state's Department of Education attributes a marked increase in graduation rates to this program.[20] Indeed, other studies have demonstrated that students are less likely to drop out of school if they have meaningful relationships with adults in the school setting. This model stands to be particularly effective in Fall River because the size of the comprehensive high school makes such relationships particularly difficult to foster. Not only are coaches valuable from the interpersonal standpoint; they also play a critical role in maintaining and updating student contact information so that they can easily reach parents or students if attendance becomes an issue.

III: Retrieval Specialists

In addition to graduation coaches, FRPS should consider employing two retrieval specialists who would be responsible for locating and bringing back students who have left school before graduating. While the district already collects information that can be used to contact students who leave school, it is difficult for teachers and staff to spend the amount of time needed to both reach out to these students and convince them to give school another try. Retrieval specialists address this challenge, targeting students who have left school and working to reintegrate them into the comprehensive high school or connecting them to alternative programs in which students can recover credits, attend school online or in the evening, or earn a GED.

Like many large, urban schools, many students at Durfee and Resiliency Prep drop out informally: they simply stop showing up. And because these schools lack the resources to reengage these students, administrators eventually sign these students out of school, succumbing to the pressure of state accountability measures that require them to improve school attendance rates for currently enrolled students. The hiring of graduation coaches and retrieval specialists will significantly enhance capacity of FRPS to track, retain, and reengage students at the highest risk for dropping out. Moreover, using retrieval specialists is a strategy that has been proven effective in districts across the country. Implementation of this approach will not only complement other recommended strategies, but it will also give FRPS a second chance to reach a large group of dropouts who might consider returning to school if presented with options that meet their needs and challenges.

IV: Expanded Mentoring and Career & Technical Education Opportunities

While the FRPS already offers opportunities for students to work with mentors and explore career and technical education, both strategies should be substantially enhanced and expanded as part of a comprehensive dropout prevention plan. These programs should be expanded to include all students who stand to benefit from the positive impact of these programs.

V: Restructured Summer Transition Program for Rising 9th Graders

In order to be more effective at easing the transition to high school and mitigating dropout risk factors, High School Now should be reviewed by school officials and restructured to be more inclusive and comprehensive. Not only should High School Now help make the experience of entering high school less overwhelming; it should also be used as a tool to reinforce academic skills, introduce the high school curriculum, set high expectations, and foster a sense of teamwork and trust between students and faculty. It may even be appropriate to integrate online coursework to help students begin to earn credit toward graduation. Such a program would give a much needed boost to students who are academically behind, instead helping participants begin 9th grade ahead of many of their classmates. Another opportunity for this program is to improve relationships between the school and parents and promote good attendance by conducting home visits during the summer. In order to be effective and meet current needs, it is expected that the summer transition program would need to expand to serve 100 students.

Evidence of impact on dropout prevention: A study of a summer transition program in the Chicago Public

Schools quantified the positive results that can come from programs that are established as gateways from one school level to another.[21] The program was particularly effective at mitigating circumstances that can lead to student dropout by improving students' academic achievement. Moreover, because many over-age students leave school after eighth grade, a key element in dropout reduction is to increase the number of over-age students who enter the ninth grade. A summer transition program thus mitigates some of the factors that might encourage students to dropout before or immediately after beginning high school.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the Urban Initiative asserted in its 2009 report, "Dropout Prevention in the SouthCoast," the factors that cause a student to drop out are diverse and complex. As such, there is no "silver bullet," no single program or project that will resolve this chronic problem.[22] There are no straightforward solutions for preventing students from dropping out. These findings and recommendations contained herein are designed to serve as a useful guide for further program development and testing, but a single "best practice" model does not exist. And because numerous strategies may come into play when designing a program that fits the contextual needs of the FRPS, a single "best practice" model is not necessarily appropriate. This is particularly true when we consider the fact that dropping out of school is the result of a long term, multi-dimensional process influenced by a wide variety of school and out-of-school experiences. Because dropout is associated with both academic and social issues, effective programs must provide support for all areas of students' lives. Furthermore, as youth withdraw from school for a variety of reasons, such services must be flexible and easily tailored to meet individual needs. The ever-growing body of dropout prevention research indicates these supports must be: multidimensional, addressing the scope of challenges faced by at-risk youth; open to the diverse range of student interests, hopes, and plans – both present and future; and aimed at improving decision-making capacities.

Adults who work with youth must be able to deal with the complexities of young people's lives in a flexible and nonjudgmental manner. Meanwhile, schools, agencies and programs must provide youth with opportunities to make important, well-informed decisions about their future and to support them in the consequences of their decisions and in reflecting on lessons learned and successes achieved. Furthermore, schools must go beyond simply focusing on risk reduction by fostering development of protective factors for all children.

Since at-risk factors are multilevel and systemic, interventions that approach risk from a "single-issue" perspective may be ineffective and have weak long-term outcomes. Rather than address risk factors as independent and isolated issues, researchers and educators now recognize the need to design comprehensive programs that address multiple contexts (i.e. family, school and individual). Many researchers believe that facilitating positive adjustment among youth, rather than focusing only on risk prevention and reduction, extends our attention to all children, rather than just those identified as "at risk."

The Urban Initiative found much to commend within the current programming and philosophy of the FRPS, and if certain conditions are met, the district's recent success in increasing graduation rates is sustainable. We believe the leadership of the FRPS to be committed to the cause of dropout prevention beyond offering platitudes. Specifically, the support of a new culture at Durfee High School that embraces a student-centered approach and a re-invigoration of active learning techniques, a strong emphasis on and advocacy for English Language Learners at the high school, and the expansion of existing and new alternative pathways such as credit recovery and other programming at Resiliency Prep, have created a strong graduation initiative upon which to build. While it is still too early to declare "mission accomplished," these approaches are singularly responsible for the district's success.

There is also reason to be concerned about the sustainability of this success. While it appears that changes at the high school have been systemic and transformational, and have the ability to be longer-lasting, the success of the ELL cohort and of the Resiliency Prep program appear to be driven primarily by strong individual personalities and off-line funding. Immediate steps should be taken to find ways to institutionalize these successes to ensure the permanence of policies and funding sources that will lead to sustainability.

The district leadership, which also has experienced significant change over the last 10-15 years, must also

assess its own ability to provide stability, a clear vision, and a consistent commitment to the cause of dropout prevention. The superintendent has given strong voice to that vision but it is incumbent on the entire leadership team to commit to it and to assess from within whether the administration has sufficient numbers of personnel and quality of talent in the right places to meet the daunting number of challenges facing it that need to be resolved.

The following set of recommendations, while not meant to be exhaustive, is an attempt to provide the FRPS with a menu of options to consider as it continues to develop a comprehensive dropout prevention plan. Many of the recommendations proposed here are based on the fifteen research-based strategies put forward by the National Dropout Prevention Center; strategies that, if employed, have proven effective in helping to reduce dropout rates. The research team does not consider there to be overlap in programming; a direct result of our belief that dropout prevention requires a multi-dimensional approach if it is to be effective in addressing the needs of a range of students with multiple at-risk attributes. The recommendations will allow for a continued discussion of priorities within a challenging fiscal context and address some gaps in service as well as some suggested improvements and expansions of existing service. They all follow up on the findings heretofore mentioned in this report, where more detail can be found to explain certain recommendations, if needed.

I. Leadership, Governance, and Systemic Issues

A. **Continue efforts to prioritize improved graduation efforts throughout the district and the community**.

B. **Assess the district capacity to meet the significant challenges it faces.** After a prolonged period of transitions, the administration must take steps to stabilize the district and determine whether its administrative structure and the capacity of individuals within that structure are adequate to meeting the myriad challenges before it.

C. **Continue to support the change in philosophy and culture at Durfee High School**.

D. **Smooth out the wrinkles in the implementation of the student-centered philosophy**. The implementation of this laudable approach, which we found evidence of at both the high school and in the middle schools, is not without its internal critics, particularly when it appears school administrators are too flexible with policies and rules in the school setting. Such an approach is not meant to be devoid of structure and rules; it is designed to understand, to a greater degree, the needs of students and to work within their individual and personal contexts in order to make school work better for them. To the extent this allows staff and students to perceive inconsistencies in the application of policies and procedures, the school's leaders must make sure that expectations are clear and that rules are a tool, sometimes used flexibly, for helping students meet expectations. The implementation of a student-centered philosophy requires discussion and training with students and staff, not just implementation from above.

E. **Improve communication between the middle schools and the high school**.

F. **Design and implement a clear, district-wide policy on student in-grade retention**. This is an issue not without conflict, given that many staff feel that students are inappropriately promoted and thus are not ready for a particular grade level. On the other hand, other staff members promote students in response to the fact that retention increases the likelihood that a student will go on to drop out of school prior to completion. The strongest retention policies are those that ensure that retention does not simply mean a student will sit in the same classroom and repeat the same coursework delivered the year before. In addition, the policy must afford students an opportunity to rejoin their class of origin during the course of the year.

G. **Enlist FRPS staff and the community in helping students understand the clear connection between their education and their future**. This can be accomplished through the expansion of career and technical courses, discussions with teachers and guidance counselors, and, more generally, through enlisting parental and community support for the schools.

II. School-Community Collaboration.

A. **Expand community partnerships.** The Urban Initiative concluded that there were many community groups/non-profit organizations with much to offer the school district and its students and that this resource was being underutilized. There are many instances where school principals have invited community partners in, but there are many occasions where principals are too busy to solicit these partnerships or are unaware of the resources available in the community. The FRPS could help by playing a more active, centralized role, allowing community partners an easier gateway to linking up directly with schools and students.

B. **Include the court system.** There are models that exist elsewhere about the local courts playing a role in increasing student attendance and moving juvenile justice services into the schools. The FRPS should look into this practice and begin to negotiate ways to include the juvenile justice system in efforts to detect student risk early on.

III. Safety

A. **Improve safety in the areas around the middle schools before and after school hours.** The research team learned that many students opt out of afterschool programming and sometimes fail to attend school entirely because they feel unsafe. With increased staff/police presence, these students will be more likely to attend and less likely to drop out (since chronic absenteeism is a significant risk factor).

IV. Family Engagement

A. **Post teacher/staff contact information on the FRPS website.**

B. **Print student handbooks in languages spoken by students' families.**

V. Curriculum and Teaching Strategies

A. **Integrate literacy into all course subjects and student activities.** The limitations on reading and literacy instructors in the upper grades makes continued literacy instruction everyone's responsibility. The Brockton Public Schools have assisted their students in making greater academic success by integrating writing instruction and activities across the entire curriculum. The FRPS should strongly consider efforts to replicate Brockton's success in literacy given the similarities between both school districts.

B. **Expand service-learning opportunities for all students.**

C. **Expand the number of teachers trained in and employing active-learning strategies.** Many veteran teachers have been slow to adapt to methods other than traditional lecture techniques, leading to negative impacts on student behavior and attendance.

D. **Settle on and implement a uniform curriculum across all subjects and grades and adhere to it with fidelity.**

VI. Individualized Instruction

A. **Support and sustain current success with ELL students at the high school.** Institutionalize policies and practices and incorporate funding for coordinator's position into the operating budget. Identify ELL students earlier and ensure they have access to alternative pathways, High School Now, career and technical education, and dual enrollment programs.

B. **Refer students in need of risk assessment earlier.**

C. **Increase the opportunities to discuss career development with students.**

D. **Increase on-site services to students in need of assistance with home issues, mental health issues, and behavioral and anger management issues.**

E. **Provide additional time for teachers and staff to meet to discuss strategies around servicing at-risk students.**

F. **Continue to find ways to mitigate the effects of size at Durfee High School.**

G. **Expand opportunities for all students to experience career and technical education through the creation of expanded career academies/pathways at the high school.**

VII. Staffing

The following recommendations are made with the recognition of the challenges inherent with budget expansion in difficult financial times. Nevertheless, the team feels that adding key staff is necessary to improve graduation rates. FRPS should identify ways to combine positions, shift resources, or target new funding to ensure that these positions can be added.

A. **Increase the number of:**
- ELL certified teachers
- Adjustment counselors
- Truant officers
- Reading specialists

B. **Hire Graduation Coaches/Retrieval Specialists.** For maximum effectiveness, the addition of five graduation coaches and two retrieval specialists at the high school could make a significant, sustainable difference in graduation rates. Such a strategy could mitigate the need for hiring additional adjustment counselors and truant officers as stated above. This would be a way of extending the successful high school ELL model to all students.

C. **Continue efforts to diversify teaching ranks and other staff to more accurately reflect student population.** Specifically, the FRPS needs to hire more Spanish-speaking staff to facilitate greater levels of communication with parents and families.

VIII. Alternative Programming.

A. **Institutionalize the success of Resiliency Prep and alternative pathways both organizationally and financially.**
B. **Expand credit recovery opportunities.**
C. **Reform and reshape the High School Now summer transition program.**
D. **Provide more alternative options for middle school students in need.**

IX. Professional Development

A. **Focus teacher/staff professional development opportunities on the following:**
- Helping teachers learn how to relate to today's students, particularly those from urban settings.
- Use of technology as a classroom aid.
- Classroom management.
- Helping students connect their education and classroom instruction to their future.
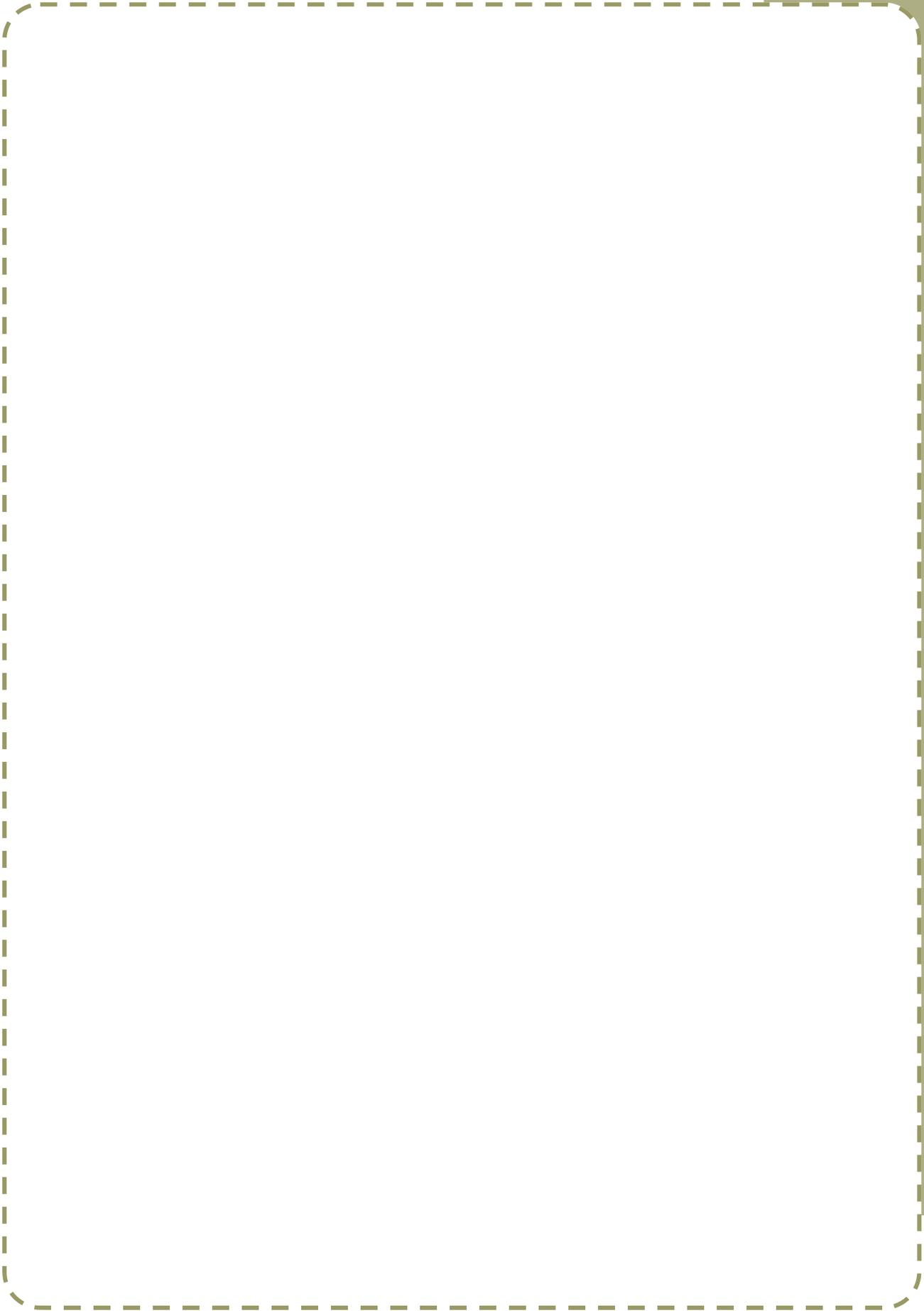
A X. Early Identification Systems

A. **Continue efforts to expand early identification of students at risk of dropping out, either independently through grants and contracting or in collaboration with state efforts.**

B. **Improve systems for sharing information with teachers and staff on the identification of at-risk students.**

C. **Create protocols for staff intervention with students identified at highest risk.**

XI. Additional Steps

A. **Continue pursuit of state and federal grants for program implementation.** The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is currently promoting their own version of the federal High School Graduation Initiative, with grant applications due February 18, 2011.

B. **Continue to assess student transportation needs.** As elementary schools have closed in the city and Fall River continues to operate a high school that is not centrally located to all students, the FRPS must continue to provide no-cost/low-cost options for students to get to school as absenteeism's effect on graduation rates is well-documented.

C. **Continue support for after-school programs/ activities.** The FRPS seems to have a solid array of after-school opportunities for students, particularly at the high school. These activities keep many students in school and on a path toward graduation while integrating the notion of how important an education is to one's future.

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