

Partner organizations:



MISSION:

To conduct hearings gathering input on how to stem the dropout crisis and present those findings to Gov. Jennifer Granholm and the Legislature to assist in their development of education policy.

Dropouts: One is Too Many



Executive Summary

Compiled testimony from 11 public hearings and online testimony (May thru October, 2008)

Also available online at www.mea.org/dropouts:

- Video highlights of hearings
- PDF files of transcripts from all 11 hearings
- MP3 audio files of all 11 hearings
- PDF compilation of online testimony
- Additional background information and research

Overview

According to the Michigan Department of Education, Michigan's statewide dropout rate is approximately 15 percent – about 21,000 students from the Class of 2007 alone. Our state cannot afford the social or economic costs of this dropout crisis: higher crime rates; lower tax revenues; greater strain on public health, housing and human services; and fewer well-educated workers to help attract 21st century jobs. That's setting aside the immense burden these dropouts will carry personally for the rest of their – and their children's – lives.

That is why a coalition of groups (the Michigan Education Association, the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators, the Kent Intermediate School District, Michigan's Children, Michigan's Charter Schools, Michigan's Promise and Michigan Future, Inc.) came together to hold a statewide series of hearings about why students drop out and what works – or doesn't work – to keep them in school.

The “Dropouts: One is Too Many” hearings were meant to jump start community conversations about this critical issue, offering a place to share information about the problems facing us and the solutions that might address them. With more than 1,600 pages of testimony from more than 500 individuals who attended one of 11 hearings or testified online, this compilation of ideas represents some of our state's best thinking on the dropout crisis and what we can do – or are already doing – to address it.

The goal of this effort was to present these findings to our leaders in Lansing to help guide their education policy decisions. What we found throughout the hearings was a sense that the public expected guidance and support from government to solve this problem – especially the necessary tools and resources to get the job done. But when it came to taking responsibility for actually getting students through to graduation and beyond, we found communities were aware that it would take a combination of local and state action. So aside from being a resource for our political leaders in Lansing, this compiled testimony also serves as a reference guide for the parents, students, educators and community activists who are working to help more students graduate from high school – especially those attending the Michigan Dropout Prevention Leadership Summit in Lansing on Oct. 20, 2008.

What follows are themes and highlights identified from the more than 30 hours of public hearings, as well as the online testimony. **This document is not intended to be a policy recommendation** – each of the partner organizations may have differing opinions on specific actions that should be taken at the national, state or local level. Rather, this document attempts to summarize the extensive conversations around this topic and provide access to ideas that can work in solving Michigan’s dropout problem. Full transcripts and audio from the 11 hearings (held in Grand Rapids, Clinton Township, Detroit, Lansing, Flint, Traverse City, Ishpeming, Wayne, Saginaw, Ferndale and Kalamazoo) plus a copy of all online testimony submitted and other supporting documents and resources, can be found online at www.mea.org/dropouts.

Key Themes and Structure

For purposes of organizing this document, the following key themes were identified:

1. Students need caring relationships.
2. One size doesn’t fit all students.
3. Tackle the problem early – high school is too late.
4. This isn’t just a “school” problem – community collaboration is critical.

These themes are only meant to help structure this document – to be truly effective, most of the concepts discussed throughout this summary cross between these simple categories to accomplish their goal: keeping students in school until graduation. Wherever specific ideas or concepts are mentioned, the name of the person testifying, the hearing they attended, and the page number in that transcript are provided for the reader to gather further information (ex. Smith, Kalamazoo, p. 12).

1. Students need caring relationships.

One of the resounding themes throughout all of the hearings was that students needed to feel cared about in order to succeed. In particular, they needed meaningful relationships with adults – both in and out of school. As teacher Joe Pellerito of Kentwood (Grand Rapids, p. 35) said, *“You capture a kid’s heart and you’ve got their head. When you get*

their heart and they know you and they know you care, they want to work for you and they want to do what they can.”

The importance of relationships and guidance for students is confirmed by research conducted by the Michigan Education Association (MEA/EPIC-MRA, Online, p. 200). A 2008 survey of 16- to 20-year-olds found that 73 percent of dropouts said they didn't have role models in high school. Twenty-five percent of young adults say they didn't get the direction they were seeking while in high school to achieve job or career goals.

Nearly every student who testified pointed to relationships and role models as being key to their success – or lack thereof (examples include: Yolanda, Grand Rapids, p. 29; Harvey, Lansing, p. 43; McGillberry, Detroit, p. 55; several students at the Ferndale student-only hearing; and many others). The focus on those relationships can be built into the school design (such as with University Prep: Johnson, Detroit, p. 23), into individual programs within the school (such as with the “Teen Leadership Program/Capturing Kids Hearts”: Pellerito, Grand Rapids, p. 34), or outside the school setting (such as the Boys & Girls Clubs: Rahn, Kalamazoo, p. 12).

In particular, alternative education programs can be particularly effective in providing such relationships for at-risk students. Student Sarah Lindsley (Lansing, p. 51) may have put it best: *“I was so excited that I got to attend a school where everyone genuinely cares about every student that walked in the doors. We weren't treated as bad kids because we attended an alternative school.”*

Such relationships are especially important for at-risk youth in urban settings. *“Simply put, without a caring and consistent adult relationship, lots of urban kids will never be engaged and motivated to learn and will probably end up dropping out. There's no way around it,”* said teacher Lori Johnson (Detroit, p. 27).

It cannot be assumed, however, that all adults have all the tools necessary to forge those relationships – training for both teachers and parents is critical to overall success (“Capturing Kids Hearts”: Pellerito, Grand Rapids, p. 43; “Project SK=IP”: Bourdon, Flint, p. 39; “Process Communication Model”: Pauley, Online, p. 122).

Other resources are necessary as well for such relationships in the school setting – class and school size were discussed in particular. As student Andrea Williams (Macomb, p. 15) said about her small school, *“Larger schools may have the programs and they have the activities. But if you don't have that person genuinely care about your life and genuinely want to see you succeed, it means nothing.”*

Another key point was the availability and role of guidance counselors. Many Michigan counselors have caseloads of more than 500 to 1, while the national recommendation is 250 to 1 (Verner, Macomb, p. 39). This shortage restricts or denies access to student support services, particularly for those students who are not college bound.

Peer relationships are also an important tool. Students can provide these important relationships for each other, particularly in mentoring relationships between upper and lower classmen (Mulcahy, Macomb, p. 12; Molter, Traverse City, p. 7; also the Match program that involves both students and community members: Romanowski, Wayne, p. 45).

Finally, ensuring students have role models and relationships is an important responsibility of parents, as emphasized by Shane Bernardo of the Detroit Parent Network (Detroit, p. 8), who works with the “Men of DPN” group providing male role models for male students without a father in the home. But as Bernardo points out, these relationships are only part of the solution: *“Dropouts are a symptom of a larger socioeconomic picture. There isn't going to be one solution. There isn't going to be one size that fits all; that provides answers for every single family's student.”*

2. One size doesn't fit all students.

The phrase “one size doesn't fit all” was the most common comment throughout the compiled testimony. The concept that all students are unique individuals who learn differently was reflected in every hearing. Designing systems, schools and solutions that embrace and utilize student individuality is critical to lowering the dropout rate.

To be sure, the new state high school curriculum was a consistent topic of conversation, drawing both positive and negative comments. The topic was discussed multiple times at every hearing and throughout the online testimony – an example of testimony in support of the curriculum is from Jim Sandy (Flint, p. 51), while an example in opposition is from Dr. Derrick Fries (Wayne, p. 6).

There was also significant discussion about how districts are changing to successfully meet the new curriculum standards (Moore, Traverse City, p. 44; Cooper, Wayne, p. 59).

There were many anecdotes questioning the appropriateness of the new curriculum, as illustrated in the comments of parent Nicole Laubert (Macomb, p. 24):

“I'm here today because my son is in ninth grade, and ever since elementary and middle school he's had a high grade point average, looking forward to high school, was very excited. He understood the importance of keeping up with math and all his classes. However, now with the Algebra I, Algebra II, geometry that is mandated all of a sudden by the state, he is unfortunately with the help and thousands of dollars for tutoring and extra help, failing algebra. He now has to go to summer school for Algebra I, Algebra II, which if they don't pass with a C, then he can't progress and he will not graduate. Now after this ... his grades are slowly going down. He doesn't want to go to school.”

Two other comments summed up the consensus. Focus Hope's Ryan Dinkgrave (Detroit, p. 75) said, *“Rigor demands supports. A rigorous curriculum is a key element of*

successful students, but only when students are given the appropriate support services to allow them to succeed in a rigorous program.”

Teacher Jim Ananich (Flint, p. 78) added, *“I don't think anybody in this room or anybody around education, whether they're a teacher, an educator, a board member, a superintendent, thinks that we should lower standards. I don't think anyone's calling for that. But I think we have to have standards that are relevant to the students.”*

Relevance was another common concept raised often in discussion. For average teenagers to truly stay engaged in their education, they need help identifying the connection between what they're learning in the classroom and their interests, goals and future plans. In particular, curriculum content needs to be related to students' real-world experiences.

Beyond the traditional school setting, this relevancy can take other forms, including middle or early college models (Wood, Flint, p. 9; Morgan-Jones, Flint, p. 63), career pathway programs (Ill, Flint, p. 88), and career and technical education programs (Wallsteadt, Grand Rapids, p. 7; Klein, Saginaw, p. 71).

In some cases, it's simply a matter of identifying what drives the student. *“If you are in an elective area...that's the carrot that [students] come to school for – it's those career/technical areas or in performing arts or in the health occupations,”* said principal Dave Richards (Macomb, p. 36).

Or as retired teacher James Klein once advised one of his struggling students (Saginaw, p. 39), *“You've got to find something in high school you like. I don't care if it's music, I don't care if it's drama, I don't care if it's art, I don't care if it's sports, I don't care if it's a vocational thing, but you've got to find something you like.”*

Sometimes that drive and relevance comes from solutions outside the traditional school setting, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps concept advocated by Richard Laing at several hearings (Grand Rapids, p. 99; Macomb, p. 46; Lansing, p. 31; Flint, p. 81). And for situations where the student is at even greater risk and in need of stronger intervention, programs like the Michigan Youth Challenge Academy are available. Dozens of people testified about this Battle Creek-area program that uses military-style discipline and training to help get voluntary student attendees back on the right academic track (Wemlinger, Kalamazoo, p. 21; and many other comments in Ishpeming, Wayne and Online).

Flexibility in the delivery of education is another key factor. Many alternative education programs testified about how the flexible, individualized nature of their programs helps students (LeCorn, Lansing, p. 41; Ziraldo, Detroit, p. 31). Michigan Virtual University and its various programs help provide such flexibility and individualization in online environments (Vashaw/Currie/Babcock, Lansing, p. 13; Whitley, Wayne, p. 70).

As an example, students who are pregnant or parenting highlight the benefits of such flexibility and attention to individual student needs. Online courses can help students

complete coursework while balancing their parenting responsibilities (Babcock, Lansing, p. 16). Child care services help students get the face-to-face class time necessary (Shook, Lansing, p. 77: Note the successful program he references has shut down due to the high cost of providing the child care). Ongoing concerns about attendance (Ananich, Flint, p. 79) and facilities (Little, Ishpeming, p. 28; Hoekstra, Kalamazoo, p. 49) for these students show that more still needs to be done.

Many who testified felt every opportunity should be provided for young people to earn a diploma, and the new four-year, “on time” graduation measurement is an artificial barrier to this. Different reporting of graduates who take longer than four years raises concerns for alternative education programs where graduation rates are adversely affected by this new methodology (Mulcahy, Macomb, p. 8; Donlan, Flint, p. 21).

Related to this, there was also extensive discussion of raising the compulsory age for school attendance from 16 to 18. While no one opposed this measure, it was roundly accepted that it would not solve the dropout problem unless it was tied to many of the other ideas presented for keeping students engaged in their academics. Superintendent Craig Douglas (Saginaw, p. 26) may have put it best, saying, *“I’d take age right off the table – make it be outcome based.”*

Attention to relevance, flexibility and individual student needs is a hallmark of well-trained teachers. Teachers Mary Kovari and Kimberly Kyff (Detroit, p. 76 & p. 91) spoke of how National Board Certification for teachers emphasizes how to reach each individual student in the best possible way at every grade level. More teacher support and training is needed to use the strategies to meet the learning needs of all students.

3. Tackle the problem early – high school is too late.

Understanding that the dropout crisis is not simply a product of our high schools is crucial to success in graduating more students. This is an issue that has to be tackled from early childhood and throughout students’ academic careers.

Echoing many other comments during the series of hearings, Person Cole (Lansing, 74) said, *“We need to start to build from the elementary on up, including community resources. At high school we’re only putting Band-Aids on. We’re triaging.”*

If we expect students to be successful with the rigorous high school curriculum, they must be properly prepared throughout their elementary and middle school years. As parent Dave Bradley (Ishpeming, p. 22) expressed about his stepson, *“There was a curriculum defining high school that hadn’t been defined in the earlier years that he couldn’t achieve; he wasn’t prepared for it. And that’s where we had let him down as parents and I felt the school system did too.”*

Early identification of at-risk students is both possible and essential to ensuring success later in high school (Lowe, Detroit, p. 88; Kyff, Detroit, p. 91; Walker, Ishpeming, p. 11). Providing early childhood programming for both the child and the parent is the aim of

Genesee's Project SK=IP (Bourdon, Flint, p. 39). And investment in resources for early childhood and elementary programming is vital to reducing the dropout rate (Moore, Traverse City, p. 49; Kennedy, Flint, p. 46).

4. This isn't just a "school" problem – community collaboration is critical.

Schools cannot solve the dropout crisis alone because the causes of the dropout crisis do not exist solely in schools.

Developing that involvement is one of the great challenges we face, especially in light of the economic stresses on families and higher family mobility rate that moves students between schools with greater frequency (Tignatelli, Macomb, p. 53). However, there are ideas and programs that can be looked to as models, including the Detroit Parent Network (Bernardo, Detroit, p. 8) and Genesee's Project SK=IP (Bourdon, Flint, p. 39). In some cases, it will take outreach to where the parents are, as evidenced in a Kent County example where school employees visit with parents and students in a donated unit of the apartment complex where the families live (Neifer, Grand Rapids, p. 24).

Discipline issues, both in and out of school, were also a big topic of discussion, with lots of focus on zero tolerance rules and anti-bullying initiatives. Proponents of the anti-bullying legislation, Matt's Law (currently being considered by the Legislature), underscored the need for consistent anti-bullying measures to reduce bullying's impact on the dropout crisis (Kosofsky, Detroit, p. 48; Epling, Lansing, p. 21). Students who testified reinforced the role of bullying in decisions to drop out. Students also expressed their need for support in overcoming their discipline challenges and should be given a second chance (this was the main focus of the Ferndale student-only hearing). Student Mieka Penning (Grand Rapids, p. 36) said, *"I fought all the time. I spent most of my elementary and junior high at home because I was always suspended. ... [Students are] not always just dropping out because they're lazy. Sometimes it's inner problems. They don't know what they want."*

Both parents and educators were concerned with discipline issues affecting seat time in school. Said parent Dionnedra Reid (Lansing, p. 62): *"My son, he's argumentative, they'll put you out for ten days for that. And really for ten days, I mean, is it insubordinate, you know? Yes, it is. Is it being disrespectful? Yes, it is. But is it worth a child being out of school for a month losing their education? No, it's not."*

Finding alternatives to out-of-school suspensions is essential, says mediator John Stark (Saginaw, p. 33): *"Either I'm out of school because I want to be, or I'm out of school because they told me I have to be; either way is a win situation for some students. So providing an alternative in-house is a good way to go in my estimation."*

The variety of barriers to student attendance were also addressed at length, including programs to reduce truancy by helping students and families overcome the obstacles that keep students out of school (Lischeron, Detroit, p. 14; Hobbs, Lansing, p. 25). Aside from being one of the major attendance barriers often discussed, poverty plays another

significant role in the dropout crisis – economically disadvantaged students are more likely to struggle academically and, eventually, drop out of school. (Jordan, Flint, p. 99 and Online, p. 93; Ready, Kalamazoo, p. 44).

The relationship between crime and the dropout crisis was also discussed. Many law enforcement officials representing “Fight Crime: Invest in Kids” testified at hearings about the impact that increased investment in early childhood programs can have on reducing crime rates – resulting in annual state budget savings of \$300-500 million through decreased criminal justice costs (Walker, Ishpeming, p. 7; Heard, Wayne, p. 34; Thomas, Saginaw, p. 5; and Hayter, Kalamazoo, p. 18).

Remedying the myriad causes of the dropout crisis must be done by a broad group of people and organizations. Said Judge Duncan Beagle (Flint, p. 97):

“I think the educators need to understand that they need to develop broad-based community partnerships aimed at serving at-risk youth who are potential dropouts. I think we've got to involve more people in our communities throughout the state of Michigan, families, churches, local government, business, block clubs and other community organizations. And we've got to understand that this is not just an educational problem. It's a community, business, economic and social problem.”

Across the state, successful community-wide programs are working to address the various factors that lead to students dropping out, such as lack of academic preparedness and parental involvement, poverty, crime, truancy and more. Examples include the Kent School Services Network (Neifer, Grand Rapids, p. 19), Greater Flint Education Consortium (Nichols, Flint, p. 36), OneD (Grays, Detroit, p. 78) and City Connect Detroit (Williams, Detroit, p. 82). Hopefully, the Michigan Dropout Prevention Leadership Summit will encourage creation of similar partnerships elsewhere in the state, while increasing overall awareness of the dropout crisis and approaches to dropout prevention.

Conclusion

Kimberly Kyff, Detroit teacher and former Michigan Teacher of the Year, summed up not only the need for broad community action to increase dropout rates, but also the overall tone of the entire hearings in one statement that makes a perfect conclusion to this report:

“Are we going to stop the dropout crisis? We have to nurture our kids. We have to cherish them. We have to challenge them. We have to love them. We have to lead them and push them further than they think they're going to go. And we can - we can do it. But Detroit Public Schools [and other districts] can't do it all by themselves. And the charters and all the different agencies, we can't do it all alone. We all have to come together for the one common purpose.”
(Detroit, p. 92)