

Dropouts: *What Should We Do?*

An issue map prepared for Alabama Issues Forums, a program of the David Mathews Center for Civic Life that focuses on innovative community decision-making.



**DAVID MATHEWS
CENTER FOR CIVIC LIFE**

The David Mathews Center for Civic Life

The David Mathews Center for Civic Life is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, tax-exempt corporation. The Center's purpose is to foster infrastructure, habits, and capacities for more effective civic engagement and innovative public decision-making. The Mathews Center is focused on how citizens create political will and sustain public policy community decisions. For information about the Mathews Center, contact Chris McCauley at P.O. Box 6, Montevallo, Alabama 35115. Phone 205-665-9005. Visit mathewscenter.org.

Alabama Issues Forums

Alabama Issues Forums (AIF) works to bring deliberative experiences to local Alabama communities using National Issues Forums (NIF) materials, as well as issue maps created by the Mathews Center. Using the information gathered through forum reflections and post-forum questionnaires, the Mathews Centers provides annual reports to the public on how citizens are thinking about issues in the following areas: citizen responsibilities, education, economic development, and public health. A reporting out session on the dropout rate issue will be held in Montgomery, Alabama in May 2011. Check mathewscenter.org regularly for more information on this event.

The Mathews Center would like to thank the following people for assisting in the naming and framing of this issue map:

Lydia Atkins, Rebecca Beaty, Phil Christian, Dr. James Day, Matthew Hartzell, Wayne Carmello-Harper, Jay Lamar, Gloria Laster, Dr. Melvin-Alonza Lowe, Lindsey Mullen, Dr. Cynthia Reed, Curtis Sparks, Dr. Peggy Sparks, Yvonne Thomas, Dr. Kay Atchison Warfield.

David Mathews Center President & CEO:

Bob McKenzie

David Mathews Center Director of Operations:

Chris McCauley

Program Coordinator:

Mark Wilson, College of Liberal Arts,
Auburn University

Issue Map Designer:

Melanie Poole

What is the Purpose of this Issue Map?

The purpose of this citizen decision-making aid is to use the suggested approaches as a framework for talking through a common problem toward more effective action. More effective acting together is both creative and sustainable. The purpose is not to simply talk about a problem. The purpose is not quickly to pick one approach over the others.

The approaches are a framework for careful weighing of attractions, bothersome aspects, costs, consequences, and tradeoffs among different courses of action. The approaches come from listening to numerous public conversations about the nature of the dropout situation in our schools. Some people view the situation as serious. Some do not. In those conversations, we listened carefully for basic ways of viewing the situation. We heard three. One emphasizes achievement. One emphasizes prevention through school programs. One emphasizes broader community action.

The first approach drives at one way of thinking about what schools should do. The second drives at another way of thinking about what schools should do. Schools might be able to do both, although there are tensions and tradeoffs in emphasis and allocation of personnel and financial resources as well as measurement of achievement

between the two ways of thinking. The third approach suggests that the situation requires a community-based approach, whatever schools might do.

How you think about the situation depends in part on local circumstances. Your community may or may not have high dropout rates. You may decide in talking through the situation that there are governmental limits on what your community can do. You may decide that part of decision-making involves what institutional policies might be. You may decide that part of the decision-making involves things you and your fellow citizens can do within existing institutional policies.

The point is you decide. As citizens, you are responsible for what works or does not work in your community. There is no higher office than the office of citizen. We look forward to hearing about your decisions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob McKenzie". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Robert H. McKenzie
President and CEO

The Dropout Situation in Alabama

Every 26 seconds a student drops out of school.

The dropout crisis is one of the greatest threats to the United States. The students that leave our education systems without a diploma create an economic, social and generational crisis for the entire nation. Every state and its students are impacted by dropouts, who create deficits in the educational wealth and financial stability of the population.

In Alabama, citizens pay a high price for dropouts. Had the state's high school dropout Class of 2008 graduated with their class, they would have earned more than \$6.4 billion in lifetime income. Having a large number of dropouts lowers tax revenues needed to fund schools and other city, county, and state services and makes it difficult for cities and counties to attract new businesses and jobs.

In 2012, Alabama will begin using the new Four Year Cohort Graduation Rate formula approved by the National Governor's Association. Looking at the 2008-2009 school year using the formula, Alabama's graduation rate was 65%. This number increases each year but until every single student graduate leaves high school with a diploma, the work will not be done. In Alabama, if educators could get 2% more students annually to return to school and graduate, 400 million dollars could be

generated into the state's economy every year. The dropout epidemic does not stop at the state line. Nationally, more than 7,000 students drop out each day, with more than 1.2 million dropping out every year. The impact that these lost graduates have on the nation is enormous. Dropouts from the Class of 2007 cost the United States more than \$329 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity in their lifetimes.

Nationally, eight out of ten dropouts end up in prison. In those prisons, more than 80% are illiterate. The United States spends over \$40 billion a year on prisoner incarceration. If we could prevent students from dropping out and help them to become functioning, positive members of society, the prison system and the promise of the nation would be altered forever.

Courtesy of Alabama State Department of Education

"Without a meaningful increase in graduation rates and adequate development of human capital, the state will face extreme limits in how much and how far other strategies for economic development will succeed in the years ahead."

— from High School Dropouts: Alabama's Number One Education & Economic Problem, The Southern Education Foundation

Emphasize Achievement

Dropouts from our K-12 schools are regrettable, but our primary focus should be on emphasizing achievement, initiative, discipline, and creativity among those who choose to stay in school. These characteristics are best promoted through competition and recognition of success in that competition. These are characteristics we want in our work force. These are characteristics we need to be successful in individual life, community vitality, and global competitiveness. We need our best young people to be all they can be.



EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

- Set high standards that can be measured to reward high achievement.
- Emphasize that education is an individual privilege, not a right.
- Emphasize that hard work is expected in school.
- Tailor education to job opportunities for global competition, particularly in math and science and their applications to technological advancements.
- Emphasize going to college to prepare our young people for even further achievement.
- Keep young people who are not willing to compete for achievement from distracting those who are.

CONSEQUENCES TO CONSIDER

- Lessens attention to desired qualities that cannot be easily measured; fosters "teaching to the test."
- Appears to contradict mandatory attendance requirements for community purposes of public schools.
- By emphasizing hard work and achievement on standardized tests, other softer skills may be neglected.
- Some needs of businesses and industries are not globally competitive but are important to the local community.
- Neglects numerous jobs that need to be filled that do not require a college education.
- Places burdens on community resources to deal with those who are not kept in schools and become even greater problems for local employees, social services, and law enforcement.

Emphasize Preventive and Corrective School Programs

Social costs are too high if we do not address dropout prevention and correction. Dropouts don't always simply lack individual initiative, discipline, and perseverance. Some young people come from poor family backgrounds and lack support for learning outside the school environment. Others get behind early in reading ability and lack positive role models. Some students have understandings and skills that are not easily quantified and measured, and they give up competing in situations that are beyond what they see as leading to productive lives. Some have family situations that require their primary attention, including those who serve as the primary wage earner for the household. We need solutions that take into account students backgrounds and situations.



EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

- Implement school-based early childhood education programs and pre-K initiatives to help young people prepare for success in school.
- Emphasize special literacy education where needed prior to fourth grade and remedial reading programs after fourth grade.
- Do not assume that everyone should go to college; offer career tech options, credit for work experience, and student informed education plans.
- Institute positive discipline and truancy diversion programs, including resource and discipline education for parents.
- Broaden sports programs and other extracurricular activities to keep young people engaged in their school and schoolwork.
- Develop additional pathways to graduation such as drop-back-in academies and other programs to make it easier to come back to school.

CONSEQUENCES TO CONSIDER

- Not everyone agrees early childhood education programs are effective, and they cost money and personnel resources.
- Schools may not have the funds and personnel to offer such programs.
- May put artificial limits on what individuals can achieve through competition, harder to standardize reports of results, takes time to make qualitative assessments.
- Intrudes on responsibilities that families should bear and takes teachers away from teaching.
- Not all students may be attracted to what programs the school emphasizes, and expanding programs costs money and other resources.
- The public may not accept major changes to the way schools operate, leading to public backlash against schools.

Emphasize Community Responsibility

Ideally schools might emphasize both achievement and prevention, but some problems are beyond the resources and capacities of schools to address. Some young people need more help than they can get during school hours. Communities should think broadly and creatively about their overall educational resources, not just their schools. Moreover, some young people have substance abuse problems and/or such rebellious behavior that they cannot be kept in schools. Yet, if they do not receive constructive attention, they may become even worse problems.



EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

- Institute early childhood education programs and pre-K programs outside the schools.
- Develop privately delivered literacy and remedial programs.
- Involve more parents, grandparents, and other adults in delivering school programs and serving as role models.
- Make more use of libraries, museums, and community programs for arts, music, hobbies, recreational pursuits and other activities not offered by the schools.
- Provide more governmental and volunteer social services to address problems with substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, and dysfunctional families.
- Provide more individual and community mentoring of young people who need hope and encouragement.

CONSEQUENCES TO CONSIDER

- Results in unequal opportunities for all children; may be uneven in quality and cost.
- Again, results in unequal opportunities depending upon who conducts such programs and who has access.
- Increases administrative burdens and takes teachers away from preparing students for standardized achievement tests.
- Community may have to take time, effort, and resources to expand these opportunities, and some community members may feel underserved by such programming.
- Expanding social services may result in significant tax increases and/or further community resource investment.
- Takes time and energy and may lead to stressful interpersonal situations and relationships.



DAVID MATHEWS CENTER FOR CIVIC LIFE

David Mathews Center for Civic Life
P.O. Box 6
Montevallo, AL 35115

The David Mathews Center for Civic Life is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, tax-exempt corporation. The Center's purpose is to foster infrastructure, habits, and capacities for more effective civic engagement and innovative public decision-making. The Mathews Center is focused on how citizens create political will and sustain public policy community decisions.