

Program Profile: Make dropout prevention a community priority

Given the realities of today's economy, "Even one dropout is too many," says Steve Smith, Assistant Superintendent of the Lynchburg City Schools. Too often, the task of dropout prevention is left entirely to the schools, but in Lynchburg, Virginia, the entire community is working to address the problem.

Students don't suddenly become dropouts in their junior or senior years. Instead, research shows that the signs are evident much earlier. "We need to address issues ranging from truancy to disengagement from school to family crisis to teen pregnancy," Smith notes.

Schools clearly can't handle all these problems alone. Teens at risk of dropping out need caring adults who are willing to take an interest in them. Working with parents, community members, local nonprofit organizations, colleges and nearby school districts, the Lynchburg school system has built a comprehensive dropout prevention program.

"When students live in desperate situations, it's hard to talk with them about long-range goals," Smith says. "Their concerns are much more immediate." In Lynchburg, the school system works with local agencies to address the family stressors that can lead to dropping out.

Students may also fail to see how classroom learning is relevant to their lives. Because athletics is so important to some struggling students, a group of community members applied for a grant called "Play It Smart" (www.playitsmart.org/pdf/GrantGuidelines.pdf). This funding has supported an academic coach to work with student athletes to help them keep up with their work.



Here's how to make it work for you:

- 1. Get—and share—the facts.** The Pew Partnership for Civic Change notes the national cost of dropouts. For example, on average, dropouts earn only about 60 percent of what high school graduates earn. What is the economic cost to your community of your dropout rate?
- 2. Start early.** Don't wait until students are 16. Begin in middle or even elementary school to identify students at risk of academic failure and those with poor attendance.
- 3. Reach out to parents.** Link family and community engagement efforts to student learning. Instead of inviting parents to a Fun Night, invite them to an event focused on math or reading.
- 4. Ask for community volunteers to serve as mentors.** Many dropouts say they have no adult to talk with about their problems. Enlist business leaders to help design your plan.
- 5. Work with local nonprofit organizations and government agencies.** A student who is worried about becoming homeless is not likely to focus on his science lab report. Know what community resources are available and direct families to them.