

North Carolina's Top Dropout Rates Found in State's Poorest Counties

By Scott Jordan

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North Carolina high schools reported 23,550 dropouts in 2006-2007, according to a report to the joint State Legislative Oversight Committee. This was a dropout rate of 5.2 percent, which is an increase from the 5.04 percent reported in 2005-2006.

Minority groups were overrepresented in the 5.24 percent state dropout figure. American Indian students drop out at a rate of 7.7 percent, Hispanics left at a rate of 7.66 percent, and black students had a dropout rate of 6.16 percent. White students accounted for 4.52 percent of the total dropouts in 2006-2007.

Many of the school systems that had high dropout rates in 2006-2007 were in counties where the per capita income is thousands below the state average of \$31,041, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis. In Swain County Schools the dropout rate was 8.25 percent, well over the state average, and the annual per capita income in Swain County is just \$22,594, substantially less than the state average. Many other counties have high dropout rates and are much poorer than the state average, such as Bladen, Caswell, McDowell and Northampton counties, among others. Some dropouts may feel that they need to work to help their families with money.

One example of how poverty can affect a student negatively is Mark Wells. Wells dropped out of West Mecklenburg High School when he was in 11th grade. "There were numerous things that had just begun to pile on my back," Wells recalled. "It was just me and my mother and she was working two jobs. She had one during the day and one at night, so there was never anyone at home to make me do my work or even come home, for that matter. My family was struggling and I felt as the man of the house I needed to do what I had to do and that was to go out and make some money on my own."

Of the 100 counties shown in the Bureau of Economic Analysis most of the poorest ones also have high a share of dropouts. When a community is poorer than the state average in income the schools often suffer by not having the tax revenue to hire teachers and buy the learning materials crucial to a student's development.

Not surprisingly many of the counties with high incomes also have a high rate of graduation. The 25 counties in North Carolina with the highest per capita income average \$32,556. In those counties the average graduation rate is 69.99 percent. The 25 poorest counties in North Carolina have an average annual per capita income of \$22,767 and the graduation rate was much lower, 62.41 percent.

One example is Onslow County, where the average per capita income is \$32,705 and last year 10 fewer students dropped out than the previous year. In Davie County, with an average per capita income of \$31,836, four fewer students dropped out from the previous year.

Kermit Buckner, a faculty member in East Carolina University's Department of Educational Leadership, said, "I bet you would find that many students have never been out of Halifax County and cannot see any better future for themselves than the realities they see at home and in

their communities. That, combined with drugs, gangs and other issues make it hard for them to think learning is important.”

There are so many reasons why students drop out of school that the North Carolina Board of Education made a list of reasons why it happens. This list has 17 reasons on it, some of which are pregnancy, runaway, poor attendance, health problems and many others. In 2006-2007 the reason most students dropped out of school was for attendance problems. This accounted for 53.2 percent of the reasons given for dropping out in North Carolina.

When a student drops out school officials try to identify why and select one of the 17 reasons. The state board of education hopes that over time this will explain the dropout trends and ultimately help the state to deal with the problem in an appropriate way.

Christopher Peake knows the struggles a high school dropout will have to face. He dropped out of Charlotte’s Harding High School in the 11th grade. “I had a baby boy on the way. The baby mother had already graduated from high school and was working,” he said.

In 2006-2007 there were 268 dropouts in North Carolina due to pregnancy, which accounted for slightly over 1 percent of all dropouts. Peake worked several jobs after dropping out that ranged from janitor to mechanic. He knew that these jobs would not support his child and would keep him living a modest life, so he decided to go back and get his GED. Peake said, “It was one of the best feelings in the world to know that you went back to get a valuable tool that is needed to survive economically.”

A student is counted as a dropout if he or she was enrolled in a school sometime during the reporting year, was not enrolled on the 20th day of the year, or has not graduated from high school or completed a state or district approved education program without meeting any reporting exclusions. This is the definition the North Carolina State Board of Education uses to determine who is a dropout.

Wake County is one of the state’s success stories for having a high graduation rate in North Carolina. The average per capita income in Wake is \$37,756 and the dropout rate is only 4.21 percent. These numbers are even more astonishing because the Wake County Public School System is now the 19th largest school district in the nation, with 134,002 students this year. Jeff Nash, of the Wake County Public School System information department, said, “What makes it even more remarkable is the fact that many may not want to admit to: Wake County is a large urban area. We are no longer a small town or even a mid-sized town.”

Not all counties can be as prosperous as Wake but many steps are in place to try to help North Carolina students stay in school. One step is having literacy coaches for middle school students. The 2007 session of the General Assembly approved 100 additional literacy coaches for middle schools, increasing the total number to 200. Another step being taken is more dropout prevention grants. The Joint Legislative Commission on Dropout Prevention and High School Graduation awarded 60 groups across the state grants totaling \$7 million to help them in their efforts to reduce dropouts. The commission will evaluate the programs and decide whether expanding or replicating them will improve graduation rates in the state.

Another thing that the state is doing to help students is to put materials online that are not otherwise available to students. The North Carolina Virtual Public School has a goal to provide

students with courses that are unavailable to them at their traditional schools or scheduled at times that students are not able to access them at a physical school location. Another new program in North Carolina is Learn and Earn Online. Learn and Earn Online is a program that enables students to register and take online courses through any community college or through the University of North Carolina at Greensboro at no cost to the families.

Sandy Lilly, administrative assistant for the North Carolina State Board of Education, said, “These programs will allow students to access courses from home. This will hopefully encourage the students to keep up with coursework and ultimately increase graduation rates.”

Crystal Packard contributed to the reporting of this story.