

Robeson, Hoke, Vance, Edgecombe and Wilkes Counties Top State for Dropouts Over Eight Year Period

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With unemployment rates going up and jobs getting harder and harder to find, it is more important than ever for students to graduate high school. While many schools are implementing dropout prevention programs and concentrating on providing kids with options to ultimately walk across the stage to get their diploma, many schools are falling behind.

Guilford, Wake, Clay, Moore and Dare counties are among the school districts in North Carolina with the lowest average high school dropout rate. According to data recorded from the Public Schools of North Carolina Web site, ncpublicschools.org, from 2001-2008 these school districts had an average high school dropout rate of 3.59 for Guilford County to 3.62 percent for Dare County.

While these districts are succeeding in keeping kids in school, other school districts in North Carolina are not doing as well. Using the same data from ncpublicschools.org, Robeson County has the highest average high school dropout rate at 8.07 percent from 2001-2008. Hoke, Vance, Edgecombe and Wilkes counties round out the top five highest average dropout rate districts over that same period. Pitt County has the state's sixth highest rate, at 6.74 percent from 2001-2008.

North Carolina dropout rates are calculated by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction using information reported by each school district, and is compiled into an annual dropout report. Data for high school dropout rates has been collected since 1989, however, the calculation method was changed in 1991, and again in 1999 to the current calculation method.

Improving dropout rates has a lot to do with knowing which students are at risk. According to data collected by ncreportcards.org, males make up 60 percent of dropouts, and Hispanic students drop out more than any other race, followed by African-American and multi-racial students.

"Teachers and faculty have to learn how to relate to those students who are more at risk for dropping out. If teachers don't understand where many of these students come from, they can't help them. Identifying potential dropouts early on by gender, race or academic problems will give them a better chance of making it to graduation," said Mike Brown, an East Carolina University psychology professor and expert on education issues.

Students drop out most frequently at the ninth and 10th grade levels, although most are 17 and 18 when they drop out. Considering that the average age of

ninth and tenth graders is 15 and 16, many dropouts have failed grades, most due to academic problems and attendance issues.

Consequently, these problems are also the reason that students are dropping out. When a student decides to drop out, most districts require an exit conference, which provides an opportunity for the student to discuss his or her reason for dropping out. Social workers or school counselors are responsible for documenting the reason for dropping out, and there are more than 20 reason codes to choose from.

Even though schools can easily pinpoint individual students who are failing academically or missing a significant number of days, these students are still dropping out. Attendance and academic problems make up 55 percent of the reasons reported by students who drop out. In most cases, a student can miss up to five unexcused days per semester, and if he or she misses more than that, the student automatically fails the class.

Many school officials, including those at Guilford County school district, are recognizing that they must provide students with options to make up missed days and improve their grades.

“We have many options for potential dropouts and students who are having problems. We have a credit recovery program where a student can recover a credit for a class that they failed, and we also offer after school and Saturday learning opportunities for students to make up days,” said Richard Tuck, director of dropout prevention for Guilford County.

Although Robeson County has the highest average high school dropout rate over seven years, school officials are working to implement programs in hopes the rate will improve. The district is not only offering kids the opportunity for grade replacement and making up missed classes, but are also taking it a step further by adapting to students who just don't like going to school.

The school's Learning Acceleration Program offers at risk students the opportunity to take classes online so that they won't have to come to campus. These students go to an alternative site and take classes online to get credit. Students are also given a chance to catch up on failed classes by taking online summer courses.

“We try to get them credit for classes any way that we can so they will be one step closer to graduation. Our high school is so large that sometimes it is hard for students to adapt or concentrate with so many students around, so this online program gives them another option. We just want to make sure that we are doing everything possible to make sure they graduate, even if it's providing them with a non-traditional way of taking classes,” said David Rich, a social worker at Lumberton High School, one of nine high schools in Robeson County.

While many schools are doing their part in developing programs to keep kids in school, these same schools may be counteracting their efforts, too. An analysis of out-of-school suspension data from ncreportcards.org shows that schools with higher dropout rates suspended significantly more students than those with lower rates.

The 10 lowest dropout rate districts suspended an average of 25 students for the 2007-2008 school year, while the 10 highest dropout rate districts suspended 50 students for that same year. Some students choose not to come back after being suspended, and when others do come back, they are so far behind academically that it is difficult to catch up.

The Guilford County school district is proving why it has such a low dropout rate by providing suspended students with the opportunity to continue their education and work toward graduation even though they are suspended from high school.

“The program has been in effect for several years and has been very helpful to students who have been suspended. Most of the students choose to participate, and it really helps them when they do come back to school because they aren’t academically behind, and they have still been in an educational environment, so it’s not too difficult for them to adjust to coming back to school every day,” said Tuck, Guilford’s dropout prevention director.

School officials agree that programs to help at-risk students are a vital part of preventing students from dropping out, but there are also circumstances that school districts cannot help.

School districts cannot prevent poverty and an unfavorable geographic location, but can use these factors to identify potential dropouts. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average family median income of the 10 lowest dropout rate districts is \$48,187. This is significantly higher than that of the 10 highest dropout districts, with an average family median income of \$35,421. The average median income of North Carolina in 2007 dollars is \$43,035. Out of the 10 districts with the highest average high school dropout rates; six of them were in the 15 to 18 percent poverty range.

In addition to the lower median income, districts with higher dropout rates tend to be located in the eastern part of the state, while those with lower rates are located in the western region.

Casey Perry, a student member of the Greene County Dropout Prevention program, has noticed this trend. “Most of the students that our program works with come from families who are below the poverty level. A lot of times they haven’t grown up with someone telling them that education is important, and they

aren't motivated to learn because they don't know what it's like to succeed and do well in school to graduate," she said.

Faculty, teachers and guidance counselors aren't the only ones taking part in making sure kids are staying in school. The North Carolina Parent Teacher Association also recognizes the need to focus on dropout prevention. Debra Horton, president of the organization, has seen the effects of student poverty first hand, and has partnered with Scholastic, a children's publishing company, to do something about it.

"We go into kid's homes, and they don't have a basic home library, not even a dictionary. We are working with Scholastic to provide kids with free books in their home so that they will be encouraged to read and take interest in academics and their education," she said.

In addition to pushing students to graduate, many school districts are focusing on getting those students to consider college as an option. In 2005, Gov. Mike Easley started Learn and Earn Early College High Schools, and as of 2008, North Carolina is home to 42 of the schools, 38 of them located on community college campuses.

The schools give incoming high school freshmen a chance to graduate in five years with a high school diploma and either an associate's degree or up to 24 hours of transferable college credit. In addition to the program being tuition free, it is also helping to lower the dropout rate in some school districts. Many Learn and Earn Early College High Schools specifically target students who are at risk for dropping out based on the student's grades and attendance records.

"The innovative type of education we offer in Early College offers students an intervention which they might not get in a high school setting. We invest in each student and provide them with personal attention to encourage them to continue their education," said Dave Norris, a counselor at Lee Early College in Lee County.

Lee County school district ranks seventh among North Carolina counties with the highest average dropout rates over a seven year period. With the opening of Lee Early College in the fall of 2006, school officials hope that rate will start to decrease soon.

Norris insists that early college can work for potential dropouts because of the personalized attention the student receives. Counselors are on hand to assist with any problems the student may have, and to make sure that the student is comfortable and learning in the early college setting. With many early college campuses being much smaller than their district's high schools, potential dropouts will not encounter as many distractions and will be given more hands on and individual attention and learning opportunities.

According to an article in *Diverse Education* magazine, low-income students participating in the early college program increase their chances of enrolling in college by 22 percent compared to those who attend traditional high school.

Norris admits that the school has had a “very small percentage” of students to drop out, but believes the program is helping many other kids who would have otherwise dropped out of high school.

While some schools don’t have ideal dropout rates, most are implementing new programs and ideas to help identify potential dropouts and to make sure they are on the right track to getting their diplomas. With many jobs requiring at least a high school diploma, schools have to be creative in finding options for students in order for them to succeed in the future.

“Our teachers are ready to help students and take the necessary steps to make sure that they stay in school. We need the parents to get involved, and just everyone to help out and make it a team effort to help these kids succeed. Everyone deserves an education. We just have to make sure there are programs in place to adapt to their needs,” Rich said.