

Journal 38

A Declining Dropout Rate

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Hello, I'm Del Burns, superintendent of the Wake County Public School System.

Yesterday, the state Department of Public Instruction released a report regarding the state's latest dropout rates and it included some good news about our efforts to keep our students engaged and in class.

For the 2008-2009 school year, we had the lowest dropout rate in six years, at 3.47 percent. That's a drop from 4.17 percent the previous year. Of all the large school districts in North Carolina, only Guilford County had a lower dropout rate, and only Guilford and Wake have had a rate below the state average in each of the past eleven years.

What I was especially encouraged by was the fact that the dropout rate declined for students of every race and ethnicity. We saw a narrowing of the gap in dropout rates, with the largest improvements among Hispanic, African-American, and multi-racial students. The dropout rate for black students is the lowest since 2003-04, and for white and multi-racial students it's the lowest since before 1999-2000.

Finally, we saw declines in the dropout rate for students with disabilities, and -- for the second consecutive year -- for limited English proficient students, and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

These are strong results that are a credit to our teachers, principals, and staff who have taken very seriously our vision that all students will graduate on time, prepared for the future.

In the last few years, we've made sure that keeping our students in school is every Wake County Public School System employee's concern, not only those who work in our high schools. The reason for that is very simple: the experiences our students have in elementary and middle school shape the reactions they have -- and the choices they make -- regarding their high school years. Each of us have a role, and a responsibility to prepare our students for success throughout their educational careers.

I have spoken to students who lost their way -- some of whom had dropped out. To learn more, I even visited several former students who not only dropped out, but were even incarcerated. In fact, one of them shared with me a very clear memory of a poor experience in kindergarten, when he did not feel valued, that set the tone for his future. Students who drop out do so for a variety of reasons, but whatever the excuse, the bottom line is that they become disengaged.

Each of us must assume a responsibility for all of our students -- to keep them connected, and to build their capacity for learning and build a strong foundation for the next year, and the next, and the next.

Five years ago, the Triangle's five largest school districts and five major corporations came together to create the High Five initiative that helped bring the best research and best practices together to address the drop out problem and increase graduation rates. From the work of this group, and tens of thousands of committed adults, I am encouraged by the report issued by the state.

Our dropout rate is improving, but we still have much work to do in further narrowing, and eliminating, achievement gaps and improving our on-time graduation rates. With the support of our community, and careful attention paid to every student, in every school, at every grade level, I think this is well within our power.

Thanks, and I look forward to talking to you again soon.