



Project for Student Success

Report to Mayor Karl Dean

**Metropolitan Government
of Nashville and Davidson County**

June 25, 2008

Dear Mayor Dean:

For the past six months, your task force of 40 community members has researched and analyzed the needs and challenges of the students served by Metro Nashville Public Schools with one purpose in mind: developing recommendations to reduce the influence and impact of student dropout-related risk indicators.

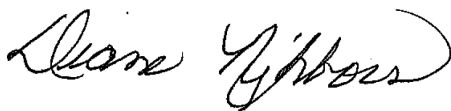
The following report represents the culmination of an in-depth and dedicated effort by the task force. Members assembled as a group for the first time on Jan. 9, 2008, and divided into four sub-committees: Chronic Poor Academic Performance, Student Risk Factors, Family and Parental Role, and Community and Neighborhood Risk Factors. These subgroups were selected based on the four areas identified as dropout risk indicators. Each group consisted of 10 members who would provide insight into the specific area of focus.

The task force conducted its work in three phases: an investigative phase to gather community input, collect data and research, and identify existing resources and programs in the community; an issue identification phase to determine the most critical and salient issues influencing the student dropout rate in local schools; and a recommendation phase in which committee members combined the data gathered concerning specific issues with research on best practices nationwide to create goals and action steps to address the dropout problem. The pages that follow summarize this entire process, and they are focused on detailing concrete, practical solutions to reducing instances of student disengagement and increasing student educational progress and graduation rates.

This report would not have been possible without the help and support provided by hundreds of local residents and outside experts whom the committee contacted during its work. Dr. Danielle Mezera, director of the Mayor's Office of Children and Youth, and Katherine Ross from Vanderbilt University provided counsel and assistance for each of the sub-committees. Their contributions to this effort have been significant and substantial.

We are grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in this important project and look forward to reviewing and discussing these recommendations with you. Thank you for your concerted focus upon improving our public schools and making our city an even better place to live.

Respectfully submitted,



Diane Neighbors
Vice Mayor
Metropolitan Government
Nashville and Davidson County



Bob Fisher
President
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STUDENT RISK FACTORS

Research indicates that the more risk factors a child or youth experiences, the more likely he or she will exhibit behavioral, academic, substance abuse, violence and related problems. Risk factors in an individual's life can put a student in the position of considering dropping out as a viable option. The committee's charge was to investigate the relationship between these risk factors and Nashville's dropout problem and recommend ways to build protective factors for the individual student at the individual, peer and school levels.

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Improve Attendance and Reduce Out-of-school Suspension

FINDINGS:

One of the early predictors for school failure is poor attendance. More time at school and instruction in conflict resolution and social skills provide additional protective factors for at-risk students. As student attendance improves, so does the graduation rate. The problem is there is a lack of personal attention regarding the absences. The current state law requires a hearing after five unexcused absences, but the process has not decreased absences.

The out-of-school suspension rate is also playing a role in poor attendance. For the 2006-07 school year, 32 percent of 15,900 students in 11 comprehensive high schools received out-of-school suspension. Out-of-school suspension is an indicator of risk for dropping out. Students are more likely to drop out of school when they lose hope for making up credits.

RECOMMENDATION:

Improve attendance through both a protocol for absences and a reduction of out-of-school suspension.

A protocol should exist at each school that lays out what will happen when a student has unexcused absences. A teacher needs to check on students when they are absent from school. This shows that someone cares about where the students are and what they are doing as well as checking to see if students are having serious problems. This also will give the student a chance to explain a legitimate reason for missing school before he or she is reprimanded. Attendance should be taken every period and used to track early dismissals. This protocol should include a way for teachers to be provided access to the attendance of other class periods. If a chronic issue becomes apparent, the authorities should be involved.

Further recommendations for improving attendance:

- Provide guidance to schools about how to use the protocol.
- Develop a way for the schools to input relevant information into Chancery on student absences.
- Train the teachers how to input information into Chancery.
- Provide professional development to the teachers explaining the expectations about who is to enforce the school protocol and how to record their actions.
- Ensure that the juvenile justice and truancy standards are in line with the school protocol of handling attendance issues.

To reduce out-of-school suspension, an in-school alternative program (ISAP) should be in place. Students who are placed in an in-school alternative program (ISAP) will continue to receive instruction and earn credits. These students will be isolated from their peers while they are placed in ISAP.

Further recommendations for reducing out-of-school suspension:

- Students will be taught by a certified teacher and supervised by a teacher assistant.
- Students will make up work for their regular classes in ISAP and not be penalized.
- While students are in ISAP, the teacher will teach conflict resolution and social skills to the students.
- ISAP can also be utilized as transitional support for these students. There is no transition placement for the students who are returning from alternative schools or the juvenile correction system at this time.
- MNPS is currently implementing a program called Make a Change in two high schools. It should be scaled up and implemented in all comprehensive high schools.



Create a Social and Emotional Development Department

FINDINGS:

Teachers have expressed that they feel overwhelmed by all of the additional needs students have before they can focus on learning. Students' social and emotional needs are often difficult to address because teachers have not been trained to handle these issues.

RECOMMENDATION:

Create a Social and Emotional Development Department within the school system led by an SEL director and staff.

With the SEL department taking the lead, MNPS should implement a comprehensive PreK-12, districtwide SEL and youth development model, in keeping with the current directives of the organization's Strategic Plan, Strategy V: Ensuring a network of personal support for each student. It would focus on fostering positive youth development while addressing other risk factors (as addressed elsewhere in this report). This recommendation is drawn from evidenced-based models and best practices for the development of social and emotional learning (Hawkins, Catalano et al.) (Werner/Smith/Henderson et al.).

Defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), social and emotional learning is the process of developing social and emotional skills in the context of safe, caring, well-managed and engaging learning environments. The primary outcomes of this recommendation will be to help students achieve personal goals, fulfill family responsibilities, enjoy good health, produce high-quality work and contribute to their communities.

Further recommendations:

- Develop a policy for teaching and assessing social and emotional skills and protocols for responding to children with social, emotional or mental health problems that impact learning ability. The district needs to coordinate with existing groups and invite community-based organizations to create a common vision around SEL practices. This will ensure that classroom instruction, social, mental health and health services are coordinated and provided to high-risk youth.
- Communicating with the stakeholders of the school community about SEL programming will be essential. The steps also involve identifying a gap between needs assessment and available resources. Building an evaluation mechanism for the SEL project is important.
- A training program will need to be developed for teachers and administrators. School-based PreK-12 SEL teams should be established to implement schoolwide social development approaches including: integrating SEL framework and practices, implementing preventive programs and planning classroom instruction such as peer mediation, bullying response, and peer mentoring. Adviser/advisee programs and co-curricular activities including clubs, AVID, and leadership classes can promote students' sense of belonging by building relationships with significant adults at school.



Increase Community Involvement in Support Centers

FINDINGS:

Influences on students extend far beyond the reaches of the school grounds. Students experience many issues that make them at risk in their communities. They need to be reached in their communities through a coalition of ecumenical organizations. Trust needs to be restored between government agencies (MNPS, Social Services, Health Department, etc.) and neighborhoods that experience socioeconomic challenges and feel detached from civic growth and success. A healthy and continuous partnership should be forged between local, neighborhood-based churches and grassroots organizations and the government agencies.

RECOMMENDATION:

Increase community involvement in support centers through community collaboration.

With the political and social momentum that exists in the community, Nashville has a perfect opportunity to improve its public schools and offer education to all its students, enabling them to be successful in the future.

Further recommendations:

- Start a local faith-based community collaboration by identifying 30 faith-based social support site locations (within hot spots for crime, truancy, dropout and identified risk indicators) and connections to government support agencies.
- Bring more involvement and awareness from the community to the support centers. Providing services to those who need them from the local community will help increase the validity of the messages.
- Provide training and technical support for developing neighborhood strategies and planning of civic-based instructions that are geared to connect at-risk families to the general aims of city government.
- Initiate requests for proposals from the community to fulfill these goals.



Improve Data Collection and Access

FINDINGS:

Many of the issues with students, parents and teachers today are the consequences and results of the risk factors and the inability to remediate them after the fact. It's important to shift our focus to prevention, making the primary intervention to build protective factors for the individual student within the context of the community. Prevention is a proactive process which empowers individuals and systems to help individuals meet the challenges of life events and transitions by creating and reinforcing conditions that promote healthy behaviors and lifestyles. With prevention comes the need to track and recognize these high-risk youth. The root causes of dropouts are indeterminable from the data available today.

Improving data collection will allow teachers to identify at-risk youth. The established early predictors for school failure include poor attendance, frequent discipline referrals and poor grades. The current data system records these three predictors in separate pages, making it difficult to track correlations between the three. Relevant student background information such as student mobility, parental education and income level, whether the student is a caregiver, and noticeable changes in the student's environment should also be factored in so that protective factors can be developed for these at-risk students.

RECOMMENDATION:

Improve data collection and access.

Further recommendations

- Include additional data functions in the current data management system. Add a summary page (or dashboard) that contains information on attendance, discipline and grades for each student.

- Create a function to alert school officials when a student reaches at-risk criteria that are set by the district. For instance, the data system should raise a red flag when a student has three absences, two referrals, and one failing grade. (The district can determine the exact alert criteria.)
- Create a data warehouse that contains academic and non-academic student data including student mobility, parental education and income level, whether the student is a caregiver, and noticeable changes in the student's environment. Data collection can be done by school personnel. For instance, teachers may enter conference and contact information regarding students. Teachers will not only have access to student background information, but also collect information for the data warehouse. Cumulative data entry will save time and effort spent on collection of information from elementary to middle and middle to high schools. Integrated reports can be generated at multiple levels to assist services for students at-risk.

CHRONIC POOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Long before students drop out of school, they have typically established a record of poor academic performance. The evidence suggests that students most at risk of dropping out can be identified early in their academic careers, but this will require a more precise targeting of resources toward underperforming schools and at-risk students. At present, the scope of challenges facing some schools has overwhelmed the resources available to provide assistance. The committee was charged with examining the issue of chronic poor academic performance and making recommendations for ways to break the cycle, which has proved to be an intergenerational problem affecting not only individual students but families and communities.

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Provide Continuous and Rigorous Professional Development

FINDINGS:

It takes three to five years, on average, to change the culture of a school. This assumes that school leaders feel empowered to make the required changes. In MNPS, school leaders do not feel the needed sense of authority to act within their schools. Schools with the greatest need to engage students who are at risk of dropping out do not have enough teachers who are motivated and skilled in the instruction of students with a history of failure. First, the hiring schedule works against getting and retaining such teachers. Second, while even ineffective teachers can improve their skills, MNPS does not offer regular and ongoing professional development aimed specifically at those teachers working in schools with large percentages of at-risk students. Third, the delivery of existing professional development programs is dictated by a calendar which does not align with teachers' training needs. There are only two days of professional development during the school year, and only five training days in total. Attendance is not mandatory, nor is it tracked. Finally, in school, teachers lack the needed time for collaboration, planning and assessment that would help them become more effective.

RECOMMENDATION:

Provide continuous and rigorous professional development to teachers and administrators at schools with chronic poor academic performance.

Further recommendations:

- Focus professional development on the content of what is taught, how that content is effectively taught, and how to work with at-risk students.
- Improve content knowledge in key subject areas and instructional skills of ineffective teachers.
- Establish a program of continuous professional development targeted specifically at teachers and leaders in schools with large numbers of at-risk students.



Reduce Mobility of Students, Teachers and Administrators

FINDINGS:

There is a high frequency of student mobility between and among schools, and individual schools are not prepared to provide adequate resources and information to help with transitions. In some of the schools studied, between 50 percent and 70 percent of students were new in a single year. There is also significant instability within the professional ranks. Successful principals and their teams are not left in place long enough to have their full impact, and potentially effective teachers are lost due to a lack of quality induction and mentoring programs that extend beyond the first year of teaching. In one underperforming school, half of the teachers were new. With mobility of students, teachers and administrative leaders so prevalent, it is almost impossible to create long-term programs.

RECOMMENDATION:

Create stability by reducing mobility of students, teachers and administrators.

MINPS should develop and implement procedures to minimize student transitions and to make moves from one school to the next seamless and less disruptive. Effective principals should not be moved or allowed to move from their school until they have completed a five-year period. Ineffective principals should either be improved through professional development or be removed from the system. Effective teachers should be offered incentives to remain at low-performing schools for a five-year period. Ineffective teachers should either be improved through professional development or be removed from the system.

Further recommendations:

- The initiative to create stability should be carried out in three stages over a five- to seven-year period, beginning in one or two school clusters where chronic poor performance is severe, allowing administrators to fine-tune efforts and demonstrate success, then expanding it to additional targeted school clusters and finally making program resources available districtwide.



Monitor and Assist At-risk Students

FINDINGS:

Perhaps the primary reason students exhibit chronic poor academic performance is that they do not see themselves as learners. This failure of identity begins in first grade. Without early intervention, by the fifth grade most students who will drop out are already well along that path. Students who are enrolled at low-performing schools or students who feel no connection to the school are not engaged learners. Too often, students perceive that their schools do not care about them. Even under more favorable circumstances, students may not understand their schoolwork as relevant. They see only limited connections between learning and their own futures. Too many of those students who do graduate from high school are not prepared to succeed.

RECOMMENDATION:

Establish an infrastructure that ensures students with chronic poor performance or who are at risk of dropping out are identified, monitored and assisted.

Further recommendations:

- Provide case managers to continually monitor individual at-risk students across schools and time, with a “SWAT” team deployed when a student is at the point of deciding to drop out or at other crisis points.
- Increase the relevance of school curricula to students using high school career academies, “school to work” options, Tennessee Technology Centers and dual-enrollment programs to provide opportunities for students to learn in ways and in subject areas that connect to their own possible futures.
- Consider using time outside of the traditional school day and calendar to enhance student learning. Options might include after school, summer school, tutoring, an extended school day or yearlong school.



Create and Expand Incentives for School and Teacher Performance

FINDINGS:

Evidence suggests that students most at risk of dropping out can be identified early in their academic careers, and it is imperative that initiatives to break the cycle of chronic poor academic performance begin as early as kindergarten and continue through graduation. This will require a changing of the culture within the school system and creating a climate in which schools become places where principals, teachers, students and families share a common belief in learning and have a sense of forward momentum supported by data, with goals of improving attendance, TCAP or Gateway scores and graduation/promotion rates.

Unfortunately, NCLB has created a climate in which it is easier to punish schools for failing to meet progress goals than it is to reward them for their successes. Any effort to foster a more positive culture in at-risk schools must offer “carrots” as well as “sticks” to motivate necessary behavioral changes in stakeholders. This must be done through a more precise targeting of resources toward underperforming schools and at-risk students.

RECOMMENDATION:

Create and expand incentives for student and teacher performance.

Create substantial financial incentives for individuals (teachers and administrators) and low-performing schools to demonstrate gains in various areas, which may include TCAP scores, attendance, persistence and graduation rates.

Further recommendations:

- Hire a program director to oversee the program.
- Implementation should occur in three stages over a five- to seven-year period, beginning in one or two school clusters where chronic poor performance is severe, allowing administrators to fine-tune efforts and demonstrate success, then expanding it to additional targeted school clusters and finally making program resources available districtwide.



Improve Data-based Decision-making

FINDINGS:

As mentioned in the Student Risk Factors section, data collection is critical to initiatives aimed at reducing student dropout rates. Despite the fact that the state of Tennessee has a data system that is the envy of the nation (the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System, or TVAAS), MNPS is not using this resource effectively. There is not a districtwide culture of data-driven decision-making. Data collected within at-risk schools is used in limited ways to identify at-risk students, if at all, and teachers do not automatically or regularly receive current, relevant information on each at-risk student. Formative assessments are not regularly used to guide instruction, and students are not tracked across transfers. There is no early warning system to identify and monitor potential dropouts early in their academic careers, meaning that many of the interventions that might assist them are never implemented. MNPS teachers generally do not use central data sources to address dropout issues, nor are they trained to do so.

RECOMMENDATION:

Implement and monitor use of a record-keeping system that frequently sends teachers, principals and schools data reports on each student, classroom and school.

Further recommendations:

- Pull data from TVAAS and internal resources to identify at-risk students and trigger the deployment of interventions or additional resources.
- Hire needed personnel to establish and administer database, to train principals and teachers in its use, and to monitor usage and effectiveness.

FAMILY AND PARENTAL ROLE

There is documented evidence that students' academic performance is affected by the influences of others in their lives. Parents and family have particular impact on students due to their emotional connections and dependency/care-giving relationships. The committee's charge was to understand the role and relationship of the family and parent as it relates to helping their student be successful, and recommend real-world suggestions for how to improve the relationships between schools and parents/families.

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Create a Districtwide “First Day Celebration”

FINDINGS:

A child’s academic performance is directly affected by the involvement – or non-involvement – of parents and other family members in ongoing interactions with the school. When children drop out of school, it is often because parents and family feel intimidated or ignored by the school and therefore do not give the student the reinforcement needed to stick with it. Schools need to create a welcoming environment for parents and families, communicate positive school news early and often, and increase positive and proactive dialogue with parents in order to build lasting, trusting relationships. The creation of that welcoming environment should begin as soon as a student enters the school.

During the committee’s investigation, one policy that continually surfaced as an example of a successful interaction with parents and families was the Mayor’s First Day Festival, which currently occurs on a Sunday afternoon prior to the start of school at the Sommet Center. It is recommended that this event be restructured and renamed the “First Day Celebration,” and that this positive interaction with parents occur in the schools.

RECOMMENDATION:

Create a districtwide “First Day Celebration.”

The events should allow parents and families to meet and converse with school personnel in an informal and unthreatening environment. They should allow teachers to pass out supply lists, class rules, and necessary paperwork, and allow parents to fill out required forms. They should also allow school staff to assess parents’ need for assistance.

Timing and event coordination will be critical factors in the success of this decentralized event. Success will also depend on community partners, churches, businesses and volunteers helping out.

Further recommendations:

- Involve outside professionals and agencies, working in coordination with school staff, to organize this activity, with the intention of kicking it off in August 2009.
- Coordinate events with each school’s orientation to familiarize students and families with all aspects of the school year ahead.
- Invite community agencies to attend and provide information for parents to discreetly take home without having to openly request assistance (after-school opportunities, free tutoring, mental health assistance, job assistance and materials needs assistance, i.e., location of food banks, school uniforms, etc.).
- Provide incentives to encourage family participation. Students should receive donated backpacks or sling-packs filled with basic supplies, as they do now. Door prizes, a warm meal, translators and possibly transportation via school buses running regular routes should also be considered.
- Teachers should call their students to formally invite them to attend.
- Schools should track attendance to create a benchmark for success.

The First Day Celebration would serve as a starting point for interaction with parents and families throughout the school year. It is recommended that ongoing meetings occur with school community members two or three times each semester to provide opportunities for open discussion and conversation. Schools would invite agencies and providers to the meetings, as well as coordinate with local churches, nonprofits and businesses to obtain meals and other donations. The meetings can occur in locations – not always at the schools – and at times convenient to the parents to ensure optimum attendance.



Expand Family Case Management to Every School

FINDINGS:

Truancy and behavioral problems that result in suspension or expulsion are often symptoms of larger personal and family-related problems. Students need to be able to be students before they can succeed. In other words, they must be allowed to concentrate on their studies, free of distractions. In more populous schools, these larger family-related problems are often overlooked. Because a student facing traumatic or stressful events is likely unable to achieve to his or her academic potential, schools would benefit from having an on-staff advocate for families, especially those whose students are at risk of becoming disengaged.

RECOMMENDATION:

Expand family case management to every school.

The caseworker would serve as a resource and problem-solver for families, helping to identify problems, and then working through the Metro system or working with outside providers to solve the family's issue. A caseworker's goal would be to see the family through to a successful solution. This would necessitate working with multiple partner agencies, providers and resources available to the school and neighborhood to assist parents in need.

This recommendation is intended to address and solve immediate problems facing students and their families.

A caseworker (who has an appropriate caseload – industry standard is one caseworker per 25 families, or 15 families if high-crisis) would eventually teach community members to locate resources available and choose appropriate actions to solve persistent problems on their own, thereby ending the cyclical nature of these problems. Once the problems are adequately addressed, fewer students will be burdened with adult problems, allowing “students to be students.”

Further recommendations:

Hiring caseworkers will necessitate greater funding. Therefore, a multi-step approach is recommended:

- Because of the need for early identification and prevention of problems, it is recommended that the first home/school coordinators be hired at the elementary school level. Their responsibility will be to identify and/or articulate problems within the homes of younger children, who may be unable to express or understand the issues present.
- Caseworkers should also be assigned to middle and high schools. Initially, it is recommended that MNPS hire one caseworker per cluster to work with middle and high schools.
- Then, with the availability of funding, MNPS should continue to reduce the case load by hiring one caseworker for every two or three schools and, finally, one caseworker per school.



Provide Professional Development to Create Supportive Partnerships with Parents

FINDINGS:

Parents often feel that teachers and school personnel only contact the home to deal with negative issues, such as academic and/or behavioral problems, and that these conversations can often be more confrontational than empathetic. It is also true that when parents and families are engaged in a positive way with teachers and principals, the partnership that is created can be the most valuable contributor to student success. There needs to be a feeling of trust between schools and families. That is why it's important that school personnel receive appropriate and adequate training in how to create supportive partnerships with the home, addressing both positive and negative issues with parents.

RECOMMENDATION:

Provide professional development to create supportive partnerships with parents.

MNPS should concentrate part of its professional development curriculum for faculty and staff (including teachers and administrators) on skills needed to deal with both positive and negative family interactions.

Further recommendations:

- Develop strategies for calling parents with good news frequently (especially at the beginning of the year).
- Develop exercises and role-playing sessions focused on how to converse with parents about negative issues openly and effectively.
- Make information available to parents about regional resources and agencies that can provide support for students/families.

- Invite churches and agencies to teacher development days. These providers could help schools develop lists of available resources. This should be done within a cluster orientation to provide resource information in the most efficient manner.
- Prepare teachers to do home visits and develop a partner program, putting new teachers together with teachers experienced in home visits, so that every child is visited at least once.
- Encourage and support teachers to work productively and respectfully with diverse populations, including culture, ethnicity, language and economic status.
- Develop a continuous and consistent program of parent/family-oriented professional development that is maintained throughout the year.
- If possible, involve parents in the training process. Working with people is different from learning about people, which often leads to stereotyping.
- Training should take place districtwide, with clear expectations that are then re-addressed within each cluster regularly. Accountability measures should be developed to ensure that development occurs, and should be tracked within the computer system to document professional development activities and home/school contacts.



Redesign the MNPS Web Site to Target Parents

FINDINGS:

Communicating effectively and continuously with parents is critical for engaging the family in support of a student's academic progress. While many families of at-risk students do not have computers, the MNPS Web site is the first line of communication with the community. It is essential that the site present a positive and proactive outreach to parents. Currently, the MNPS Web site is not user-friendly for parents. It commits a great deal of time and space to councils, policies and organizations that have little relevance or direct impact on parents and families. This is a missed opportunity to easily connect with some parents and families and provide necessary information in an effective and efficient manner. This effort to connect can assist parents directly and further promote the goals and outcomes of the previously stated recommendations. Once the Web site has been retooled to focus on communication with parents, other communications vehicles can be retooled as well to reflect this parent-focused approach.

RECOMMENDATION:

Redesign the MNPS Web site to target parents.

The Web site should easily and obviously provide answers to frequent parent questions. It should provide locations and contact information for parents to receive answers and assistance to any other questions or concerns. The site should provide links to local resources', agencies' and providers' Web sites so parents can receive not only answers but also access support when necessary. It should provide parental access to students' course information and grades. The site should celebrate MNPS successes by promoting recent graduates, including college plans and scholarships. It should allow parents to provide useful feedback to MNPS through surveys and questionnaires.

Further recommendations:

- Compile a list of frequently asked questions.
- Compile a list of providers, agencies and resources (which would be the same compilation necessary for the previous recommendation).
- Compile a list of graduates and their future plans.
- Determine a reputable survey and/or questionnaire online developed by a valid college or university that allows for parental feedback.
- Use a member of the current MNPS technology team to update the Web site with said changes over the course of two to four weeks.
- Continue to update the Web site to ensure valid and verified information.

There should not be any additional costs for this recommendation, as the Web site already exists and technology staff are already members of the budgeted faculty and staff. If it is necessary to engage an outside agency to assist in the Web site redesign, it may be possible to identify private funding sources.

COMMUNITY AND NEIGHBORHOOD RISK FACTORS

Poverty, violence, segregation, low percentage of home ownership, low educational attainment, high unemployment and lack of services characterize the neighborhoods of the majority of youth in Metro Nashville Public Schools. This social disorganization leads to crime, decay and disorder for residents of these neighborhoods. These distressed neighborhood conditions are part of the daily life of students in MNPS and must not be ignored. Distressed neighborhood residence is one of the top indicators that a youth will leave school before graduation. Under these conditions, it is very difficult for youth to attend school ready to learn and succeed. The committee's charge was to collect and process information to understand the facts about MNPS and Nashville's neighborhoods and to develop recommendations that will better address the needs of students from distressed neighborhoods and change area conditions to produce neighborhoods that support students' educational success.

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Provide Access to High-quality After-school and Summer Programs

FINDINGS:

There are many youth programs operating independently and disconnected from each other throughout Nashville. The city is sorely lacking in programs and opportunities for middle and high school students in particular. Existing programs may not match the needs of youth in high-risk neighborhoods for accessible locations, targeted social and educational interventions, and hours of operation. School dropout rates are overwhelmingly related to school absence, early failure and high mobility. As proved in numerous national studies, active participation in high-quality after-school programs in the middle grades leads to higher levels of school engagement, attendance and performance.

RECOMMENDATION:

Provide youth access to high-quality after-school and summer programs and learning opportunities.

Programs must be conveniently located near where students live. Parents must be educated about the afterschool programs available to their children and the benefits of participation. Programs must give young people plenty of “voice and choice” in curriculum and structure.

Further recommendations:

- Develop a centralized, comprehensive database and referral service by contracting with an organization such as 2-1-1.
- Update and maintain information about providers, organizations and programs via the database.
- Develop a marketing and awareness campaign targeted to parents and families of middle school youth as well as potential referring organizations.

- Create an organized system of out-of-school opportunities and support for teens in the most at-risk and underserved communities.
- Form a community advisory council composed of parents, families, youth, school and community representatives, law enforcement, religious leaders, resident associations and neighborhood groups to identify other community needs.
- Make programs accessible at least three days a week, as well as during school holidays and vacation periods.
- Have the capacity to serve on average between 75 and 150 youth in each cluster who will regularly attend and participate.
- Work with MNPS to coordinate a transportation system that links youth with after-school opportunities.
- Partner with local colleges and universities to recruit volunteers to help supplement core staffing.
- Engage youth and families in program design and management.
- Emphasize activities that address the needs of youth by offering a range of asset-based activities in the following areas: academic enhancement, career awareness, school-to-work transition, life skills, community building, and service and recreation.



Re-engage and Recover Disengaged Youth and Young Adults

FINDINGS:

Disengaged youth pose a major problem in Nashville's distressed neighborhoods. They have greater incarceration rates, diminished earning power and greater reliance on public assistance. Problems such as poverty, crime, segregation, truancy, low educational attainment and high rental rates create multiple risk factors for youth in distressed neighborhoods, and these problems are beginning to migrate to suburban areas. Metro Nashville Police Department data continues to show that youth who are not successfully participating in the education system are likely to also be engaged in criminal activity. Of the 801 juveniles arrested for serious offenses in 2007, 82 percent had been previously arrested, and 44 percent had been previously arrested for a violent offense.

The loss of these young people's contribution to society is as devastating as the impact of their behavior on their victims. In many cases, disengaged youth are impeded by social, economic and psychological barriers to completing school. Many have the talent and interest in returning to school, but they must also continue to meet demanding family and economic responsibilities. For these disengaged youth to succeed, the Nashville community must provide multiple supports and a different kind of school. Building a coordinated system of outreach, graduation alternatives and supports will help to return more young people to productive participation in the economy and society.

RECOMMENDATION:

Re-engage and recover disengaged youth and young adults.

Further recommendations:

- Promote communitywide understanding of current re-engagement through the GED programs.

- Work with MNPS staff, Alignment Nashville and the Nashville Career Development Center to establish a community committee (including members who are disengaged youth) to address this population's challenges directly.
- Develop a marketing and awareness campaign using community-based organizations that targets disengaged youth and their families.
- Incorporate this awareness campaign into semi-annual events at which disengaged youth and adults may learn about available opportunities.
- Provide a centralized and individualized service that assures every interested youth is re-engaged to the maximum extent possible. Every interested youth who has left school without graduating should be offered a face-to-face individual assessment, a personalized plan, case management and assistance in accessing services.
- Establish a committee with strong leadership from the Mayor's Office, MNPS, the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, local colleges and universities and the Board of Education. These leaders must be committed to the belief that the responsibility of MNPS extends beyond in-school youth and must include re-engaging and recovering disengaged youth.
- Fund this centralized service within MNPS to assure consistency of information, evaluation, referral and strong planning.
- Provide one or more high schools for youth ages 16 to 24 through which they may complete their high school diplomas.
- Study and evaluate current schools in comparable cities to build a model useful for Metro.
- Solicit private funding while promoting state and federal funding streams.