

## York County targets dropout rate, suggests solutions in report

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Hundreds of students drop out of York County schools every year, falling onto taxpayers' laps and out of reach for many employers, according to a new report.

The report by the [United Way Of York County](#) casts the problem as a burden on taxpayers who fund prisons and social services for dropouts, and as a barrier to work force development.

The report estimates that more than 6,400 York County students quit school between 1998 and 2008. The United Way proposes spending \$4.5 million in the first year and \$3 million annually for an indefinite period to scale up dropout-prevention programs and launch new ones. The group also urges businesses to get involved by donating money to that effort, by helping employees earn diplomas and by setting up a task force to suggest other contributions.

About 78 percent of York County high school students graduated on time in the 2005-06 school year, according to the report. Nationwide, the high school graduation rate is about 70 percent, according to the report. Even though York County is beating that average, the region must do better, said Robert Woods, executive director of the county's United Way.

"I think we should be past 90 percent. I think this entire country needs to be doing a lot better," he said.

The United Way last week provided the Business Journal with a copy of the report, which had not previously been released to the public. The document argues that dropouts cost taxpayers dearly in the long run because they are more likely to receive government assistance and to be incarcerated. The county's 6,400 dropouts over the previous decade will cost taxpayers more than \$816 million in spending and lost revenue, the United Way said. That estimate is based on a 2007 study by researchers at Columbia University in New York City that said taxpayers would reap a \$127,000 benefit for every potential dropout who can be kept in school, after deducting the costs of instruction and support.

High dropout rates translate to fewer skilled employees for businesses, according to the report.

"We are going to be losing a lot of workers over the next few years due to retirement ... which makes all the more critical the need to try (and) identify new workers," said Rob McIlvaine, a consultant on work force issues and former vice president of work force development at [Mantec Inc.](#), a York County nonprofit that consults manufacturers. McIlvaine served on the committee that oversaw the report.

At the heart of the report is a recommendation to pump millions of dollars into anti-dropout programs. Funding sources could include government grants, the [United Way Of America](#) and donations from local businesses, the report says.

One of the recommended programs is Students and Mentors Achieving Results Together (SMART), an initiative of [Big Brothers Big Sisters Of York And Adams Counties](#) that pairs elementary school students with high school mentors.

Early academic failure is a risk factor for dropping out, so it makes sense to focus on young children, said Bob Banfill, executive director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of York and Adams Counties.

"If you wait until they're in middle school (or) high school, the patterns are already developed," Banfill said.

The United Way also recommended scaling up Quantum Opportunities Program, an after-school program operated by the YWCA of York, and LinkCrew, a program operating in several school districts in which older high school students mentor incoming freshmen.

More money also should go to the York County Truancy Prevention Initiative, a partnership among the York County Court of Common Pleas, law enforcement, social service providers and others that is being supported by the York County Bar Foundation, according to the report.

The report said businesses should adopt a program that would help employees earn a diploma, but does not offer details. It also calls on business leaders to convene a task force that would make recommendations on how the business community can contribute.

The United Way wrote the report under the umbrella of YorkCounts, a nonprofit coalition with a broad mandate to improve the quality of life in the county. YorkCounts in 2007 issued a separate report on urban problems that recommended an urgent push to reduce the dropout rate.

Numbers compiled by the United Way suggest the dropout phenomenon is a problem countywide, though some districts account for many more dropouts than others. Six school districts, for example, produced more than half of the 6,400 dropouts the report estimated for the last decade. York schools accounted for more than 1,400 and the West Shore School District for more than 650, according to the report.

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