



Forum Unites Business and Education Leaders on Dropout Prevention

*By Jonathan Yeomans
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Greensboro, N.C. — When a student drops out of high school, they hurt more than themselves.

Dropouts cost state taxpayers millions of dollars a year in lost revenue and taxes, as well as Medicaid and incarceration costs. Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed and end up in prison.

"The prospects for a high school dropout are bleak at best," said SAS CEO Jim Goodnight.

But a panel of business executives and state school leaders gathered at the NC Chamber's annual meeting on Wednesday agreed that state businesses and schools have the ability to keep students in the classroom, engaged in their work and prepared for the future workplace.

The first, and perhaps most important step, is to integrate technology into teaching.

Goodnight calls technology, specifically classroom laptops, the "silver bullet." He points to Cary Academy, where all students have a laptop computer, and not coincidentally, all graduated and went on to college. He also cites the state's recent [One-to-One Computing Initiative](#), where students in a handful of state public schools were assigned laptops to use with their class work.

Goodnight said that since the initiative started about a year ago, superintendents have reported that dropout rates have decreased, student discipline incidents have decreased by as much as 12.5 percent and detentions are down as much as 17 percent.

At Raleigh Centennial Campus Middle School, which began the program last year, teachers say that the initiative has enabled them to more easily individualize their instruction and customize their curriculum. It has also improved student engagement and motivation, they said.

"Laptops have made a positive impact on behavior and achievement," Goodnight said. "They live with this stuff at home; why not have it at school?"

[Scott Ralls, president-elect of the North Carolina Community College System](#), said that the private business community can help by mentoring students or providing opportunities for them to apply the skills they've learned by offering internships, job shadowing or peer mentoring.

He cited a study by the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation that reports that the number one reason that students drop out is they don't see the relevance of their schoolwork outside the classroom.

"Eighth and ninth-graders are very impressionable," Ralls said. "They need to see the connection between what they are doing in schools and what they'll do in the long term." For students living in rural communities where business mentors are scarce, technology can connect them to someone. That's the goal of Futures for Kids, an organization that uses technology to help students discover their interests and set educational and career goals.

"We look at technology as the great equalizer," said Susan Milliken, executive director of [Futures for Kids](#). "Nothing will take the place of a face-to-face relationship, but through the program ... we can provide that mentorship, that connection to the business person for that relevance."

Panelists and audience members all agreed that something needed to be done soon. Bill Shore, director of Community Partnerships at GlaxoSmithKline, said that the dropout crisis was forcing the state to confront a "Sputnik-like moment."

"We've had the same discussion for over 20 years," Shore said. "We don't need any more meetings, we need a movement."

Goodnight closed the meeting with a challenge to all state businesses: do something to curtail the dropout rate. Business can enter the dropout challenge at www.ncchamber.net/dropoutchallenge.

Jonathan Yeomans is a staff writer for NC Magazine and can be reached at jyeomans@sacherokee.com.

