

GRANTING NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Committee hands out millions in grants to organizations helping to lower the state's dropout rate

BY JONATHAN YEOMANS

The future is grim for most students who drop out of high school. They are more likely to be sent to prison than those who have earned a high school diploma, and they'll earn substantially less than students who have graduated.

"We know that if (students) become dropouts, then the chances of them having a quality life is practically next to none these days in this economy," said Shirley Prince, superintendent of Scotland County Schools.

As state businesses grow, the state's inability to recruit a strong local workforce becomes apparent, and dropouts have become a hot-button issue.

To combat the problem, the state General Assembly last year formed the Joint Legislative Committee on Dropout Prevention and appropriated \$7 million that the committee divvied up among state education programs aimed at increasing the graduation rate.

In 2007, 60 groups, including school systems, schools, agencies and nonprofits across the state received grants between \$25,000 and \$150,000. The committee received 307 grant applications seeking more than \$34 million in funding.

This year the committee will divvy up a larger chunk of money — \$15 million — but the end goal remains the same: graduate more students. About \$9.2 million of the money will be dedicated to new proposals, and about \$5.5 million will be earmarked for proposals from 2007 that weren't funded in the original review. The committee plans to distribute funding later this year.

Prince, one of the 15 committee members on last year's panel, called the dropout issue "critical," because the types of jobs that hire residents without a high school diploma rarely pay a family-sustaining wage.

Prince, who was appointed to the committee by Gov. Mike Easley, argued that many schools have adopted a mentality regarding student achievement that is too rigid. Scotland County is currently pioneering a new, nontraditional high school model that provides students a much more personal, flexible learning environment. Prince said the school system's goal is that 95 percent of the ninth-graders who enrolled last year be college-

ready — have the credentials to enroll in a two-year college or four-year university — when they graduate.

"We herd them through classes with this idea that you sink or swim, and we are doing an injustice to them," she said. "We must hold the standards constant, but differentiate and vary the amount of time they need, as well as give them support to meet those standards.

"Successful students rarely drop out."

The key to student success is support, she said, and lending that support as soon as the student needs it.

"The big thing is that it doesn't start in high school; it starts when they enter our pre-K program," she said. "We need to make sure that every experience they are provided is the best that it can be. We want every student leaving second grade, leaving on grade level."

Prince said she lobbied for programs that placed emphasis on reading and mentoring, two of the most important components to success in school.

"If you can read and write, you can pretty much do anything you need to do," she said. "We can get you where you need to be."

Cynthia Marshall, state president of AT&T and a committee member, called the dropout problem a "silent epidemic" that was killing the community. A third of state students who enter ninth grade don't graduate, and that number jumps to 50 percent for minorities, she said.

"Education saved my life, and we need to do that for these kids," she said. "It's unacceptable that one third of our kids aren't graduating from high school."

Marshall said that the committee looked favorably on new and innovative

Danny Nelson had been out of school for more than 20 years, working hard for the same big company — and then he was laid off. North Carolina Community Colleges gave him the opportunity to prepare for a new job in pharmaceuticals. Thanks to state-of-the-art training from BioNetwork, he's looking forward to a long career with limitless potential.

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GRANT RECIPIENT	AMOUNT REQUESTED/ FUNDED
Alamance Burlington School System	\$67,122
Anson County Schools	\$150,000
Athens Drive High School	\$37,980
Avery County Schools	\$148,474
Beaufort County Schools	\$150,000
Building Hope Community Life Center	\$90,000
Buncombe County	\$150,000
Burke County Public Schools	\$149,840
Caldwell County Schools	\$150,000
Carter G. Woodson Public Charter School	\$131,466
Carteret County Public Schools	\$149,690
Centro de Accion Latino	\$72,500
Chatham County Schools	\$148,000
Clay County Schools	\$150,000
Cleveland County Schools	\$148,835
Columbus County Schools	\$150,000
Communities In Schools of Charlotte Mecklenburg Inc.	\$150,000
Communities in Schools of Cleveland County	\$94,377
Communities In Schools of High Point Inc.	\$80,882
Communities in Schools of Orange County	\$150,000
Communities In Schools of Wilkes County	\$29,231
Cross Country for Youth	\$150,000
DREAMS Center for Arts Education (DREAMS of Wilmington Inc.)	\$85,500
Durham Public Schools	\$149,302
Edenton-Chowan Schools	\$150,000
Futures for Kids	\$150,000
Gaston County Schools	\$149,570
God's Grace Ministries: Operation Homework	\$118,540
Graham County Schools	\$150,000
Harnett County Schools	\$150,000
Hertford County Public Schools (Middle School)	\$96,770
Hertford County Public Schools (High School)	\$25,390
Hickory Public Schools	\$149,650
Hoke County Schools	\$147,554
Iredell-Statesville Schools	\$149,967
John T. Hoggard High School	\$105,549
McDowell County Schools	\$132,920
Mitchell High School	\$95,033
NC A&T State University	\$150,000
NC Department of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention	\$60,000
New Hanover County Schools	\$143,178
New Light Missionary Baptist Church Intergenerational Outreach Suspension Program	\$149,320
North Carolina Central University Foundation	\$150,000
Northern Moore Family Resource Center	\$86,500
Pitt County Schools	\$130,590
Polk County Schools	\$100,678
Randolph County Schools	\$88,627
South Stokes High School	\$53,370
Swain County Public Schools	\$126,189
The Education Foundation for Elizabeth City	\$39,008
The Housing Authority of the City of Winston-Salem	\$149,660
The Task Force for Student Success Inc.	\$124,865
The Urban Restoration	\$99,000
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	\$126,651
Wake Forest-Rolesville Middle School	\$134,515
Wellcome Middle School	\$61,585
Western Region Education Service Alliance	\$25,000
Youth Resource Center/Millennium Outreach Center Inc.	\$57,565
YWCA of Asheville and Western North Carolina	\$89,300
YWCA Of Winston-Salem	\$150,000

programs that could prevent students from dropping out of school. Money was distributed geographically throughout the state.

"Our job was to look at programs that really provided some new ways to look at innovation — programs that hadn't been in place too long and that had begun in the past five years," she said. "This was really about innovation, to get people to think outside the box, so they could reach kids in a different kind of way."

Marshall said that increasing the graduation rate would also benefit state businesses.

"We hire people all the time, and I need to be able to tap into a workforce that has 21st century skills," she said. "These people are my future employees, my future share-owners and my neighbors. I have a vested interest as a business leader, so I'm tapping into that market."

bill Farmer, co-chairman of the committee and president and CEO of the The Farmer Group, is a product of public education: He attended state public schools and graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He agreed that public education is critical to success of both students and state businesses.

Farmer, whose company assists non-profits and businesses in developing and implementing public policy programs, favored the programs that worked with assistance with homework and mentoring, because a large part of reason students drop out of school is that they don't get enough personalized attention.

"They need additional assistance, and the schools don't have the resources to provide the kind of assistance they need," he said. "And programs that provide mentoring are important because students need to see and be involved with people who can mentor them and show them why getting a high school diploma is important."

Like Marshall, Farmer said that the dropout rate has a direct, substantial effect on state businesses. The high number of dropouts gives a negative perception of the state's public education system to companies that are considering relocating to North Carolina, he said.

"I think it's an economic imperative," Farmer said. "It's a competitive disadvantage for the state. ... If we don't confront the dropout issue, there will be states whose public education will surpass our state and make it much more difficult for us to compete with new businesses."

"When you have a third of your middle-school-aged students not graduating from high school ... that's not a very attractive proposition."

Farmer, who will co-chair the committee again this year, advocated for a more analytical approach to distributing money. He said that there were more definitive factors to solving the dropout problem than gender, race and ethnicity. For example, he said that studies have shown that when a student fails a grade at any point in his or her academic career, the likelihood of not graduating increases substantially.

"If you failed Algebra 1, then as soon as you failed Algebra 1, we should start focusing on you," he said.

He also said that he will encourage the committee to give funding to programs that improve teacher recruitment and retention.

"At the end of the day, what will make schools successful are strong teachers, superb principals, mentoring, homework assistance and small classrooms," he said. "Those are the answers, but they are expensive answers, and they may require more creativity to resolve those issues." •



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