



# THE BRIDGE

## Alabama's High School Dropout Rate



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### **Purpose of this Paper**

The purpose of this research is to present the stake holders of Alabama's youth with a proven option for decreasing the rate of youth dropping out of school in Alabama. The problem of youth dropping out of school is defined, research presented on success of alternative dropout programs within and outside of the State of Alabama, Alabama's economic impact from dropouts is addressed and a recommendation of funding the Helping Families Initiative (HFI) is given. The research contained within this report will provide valuable insight to an option available for providing the State of Alabama with decreased numbers of youth dropping out of school. By reducing the number of youth dropping out of school in this state, Alabama positions itself for a reduction in an economic impact Alabama currently experiences due to the high dropout rate. Consequently, increasing the graduation rate in Alabama by effectively using the HFI will not only lessen burdens by the citizens of Alabama but will help create hope and a bright future for Alabama's youth and their families.

### **Problem defined: Alabama's Youth Dropping out of School**

What does a high school dropout look like? How would one describe them? They come from all walks of life, all economic backgrounds, all races, and nationalities. Just as there is no one "type" of dropout, there is no one "why" youth drop out of school. Young people in the US drop out of school for numerous reasons. Some of the main reasons that youth leave school without earning a diploma include: academic difficulty and failure (this could include and is often linked with being held back or having to repeat a grade), poor attendance, disinterest in school, transition to a new school (this could include moving from middle school to high school or a family move to a new area), and other life factors. The important thing to realize is that the decision to drop out of school is rarely done on impulse. Normally, there is a long process of absenteeism or academic difficulty or both before the youth makes the decision to leave school altogether. Recognizing the warning signs and working with the family during this period could help to reduce the number of high school dropouts in the State of Alabama.

According to the Southern Education Foundation, roughly 1 million American students begin ninth grade each year, but only 70 percent of them graduate four years later. Each year, nearly one-third of all public high school students-nearly half of all African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans-fail to graduate from school with their classes (Silent Epidemic)

Alabama is far worse than the national average. Only about 60 percent of Alabama students finish high school. A full-classroom of students drops out of school every day in Alabama

according to a 2008 study performed by the Southern Poverty Law Center. In every independent analysis, Alabama ranks between 42<sup>nd</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> in the nation in graduation rates. (SEF). This pattern has persisted for over 25 years.

### **Economic impact of dropouts to Alabama**

Alabama suffers greatly economically from drop-outs generated by its current method of addressing drop-outs. Not only does Alabama suffer from the expense of directly supporting drop-outs and their families, Alabama does not gain revenue for the work or accomplishments of most drop-outs as they would if students completed school.

In Alabama families headed by a high school dropout, median income earnings declined by nearly a third between 1974, and 2004. (Achieve). As wages decline, less revenue exists to pay for education and social services, and the entire state economy slows. The Alliance for Excellence in Education estimates that Alabama's dropouts from Class of 2007 would earn an additional \$6.7 billion in their lifetimes if they had completed high school.

If Alabama were to decrease its dropout rate by 2 percent and then sustain that annual rate of improvement over two decades, the state would gain more than \$190 million in government savings and revenues. If the state also increased by 2 percent annually the number of high school dropouts who return to get a diploma, the net gains would approach \$400 million (SEF).

If Alabama's dropouts from the class of 2006 had graduated instead, the state could have saved more than \$245 million in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured care over the course of those young people's lifetimes.

If Alabama high schools and colleges raised the graduation rates of Hispanics, African-American, and Native-American students to the levels of white students by 2020, the potential increase in personal income would add more than \$2.1 billion to the state economy.

Increasing the graduation rate and college matriculation of male students in Alabama by only 5 percent could lead to combined savings and revenue of almost \$53 million each year by reducing crime-related costs. (Alliance)

Alliance for Excellent Education translates in 2009, numbers to nearly 25,000 students did not graduate from Alabama high school in 2008. The economic ramifications for these students personally and for the state at large are: In terms of lifetime earnings, these 25,000 dropouts will forego nearly \$6.5 billion and will add \$245 million to Alabama's health care cost burden.

According to the Schott Foundation, the annual economic burden to black achievement gap to Alabama's taxpayers is \$454 million. In addition, the Foundation report included estimates of the potential return on the state's investing in closing the gap including potential net increases in state revenue of \$279 million. These estimates are based on a Columbia University study by Henry M. Levin, PhD. which projects that over a lifetime, each additional high school student would yield a public benefit of \$209,000 in higher government revenues and lower government spending.

The McKinsey & Company report on economic impact of achievement gap states that "on average, African American and Latino students are roughly two to three years of learning behind white students of the same age." This gap exists regardless of how it is measured. The report estimates that if this "learning gap" were narrowed it would have increased the US 2008 GDP between \$310 and \$525 billion.

The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that in its new issue brief, "Paying Double: Inadequate High Schools and Community College Remediation," that Alabama spends almost \$24 million a year for two-year colleges to teach recent high school graduates the basic skills they should already know before starting college. The state loses another \$29 million in lost wages, according to the alliance, since students who start college but aren't ready for it are more likely to drop out without a degree, which considerably lowers their earnings potential.

Education Weeks report in 2008, "Diploma's Count", projected that the high school graduation rate for the state in 2004-2005 ninth-grade class at 61.3 percent. The national average is 70.6 percent.

A study conducted by the Southern Education Foundation in 2007 highlighted the importance of graduating. The study cited real economic consequences of drop outs effect on Alabama's economy. A high school dropout in 1956 made \$.51 for every \$1 that a college graduate did. In 2002, students who dropped out of high school made less than \$.29 for every \$1 the average college graduate earned.

Based on the aforementioned research, Alabama has much room to improve its drop-out rate. It is not doing enough in addressing the high school dropout rate. Additionally, because of the rate that Alabama students are dropping out, the state is losing billions of dollars in lost wages earned that can be taxed and turned into revenue by the state. Alabama is increasing in funds that it must pay to support students over a lifetime that drop-out.

### **Effective Programs Found in Other States**

In determining what alternative approaches are being utilized by other states; a review of the dropout rate data was conducted for school year 2006-2007. A web based search for information about dropout prevention programs was performed for states that had graduation rates that were greater than 80 percent. Below you will find summaries for programs being utilized in some of the top performing states; New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Minnesota and Vermont. These states had graduation rates between 82.3 and 86.2 percent. A common element in all of these programs is family engagement and early detection of students at-risk of dropping out. The New Jersey and Pennsylvania programs are similar in that the Attorney General's Office in each state plays an active role. A active role by the Attorney General's office is a concept that will become important in the final recommendation for Alabama.

#### **New Jersey – (Average Graduation Rate 2006-84.8 %)**

- *The Governor's Prevention Strategy for Safe Streets & Neighborhoods:* Identifies the issue of "Keeping Young People in School and Engaged" as the critical starting point for successful prevention of youth and gang violence. Through the Office of Attorney General, the prevention strategy is promoting coordination of all state youth and family-servicing resources and promoting the use of evidence based programs and strategies to help young people succeed. Specific initiatives include implementation of truancy reduction pilot programs, expanding jobs and workforce training opportunities for at-risk teen, and expanding out of school time opportunities.
- *The New Jersey High School Graduation Campaign, Forging New Jersey's Cradle to College & Workforce Pipeline for All Children:*
  - *Ensure Strong Adult-Student Relationships within the School and Community:* Positive relationships begin at home with mom, dad, grandparents, and siblings, but they must also be present in all aspects of a young person's life. Successful schools and their partners should ensure that all of their students are connected to as many positive, meaningful relationships as possible. Teachers, coaches, mentors, peers, ministers, principals, and counselors are just some of the many people in the community with whom students should have positive relationships.

- *Maximize Parent and Family Engagement:* Students and participants most frequently cited parents and family relationships as the most important indicators of student success. Schools and community partners should be proactive in: (1) enhancing family skills and knowledge; (2) expanding avenues for increasing positive interaction between parents and schools; and (3) improving access of parents and families to support services.
  
- *Schools and Classrooms Should be Places Where Children Want to Be, Where They Feel Safe, and Where Their Minds are Fully Engaged:* Beginning on day one, all students should be met with the expectation that they can and will do well in school, will ultimately graduate from high school, and will then have the option to attend the college of their choice. High expectations and meaningful engagement are at the heart of school and classroom culture and can also be reflected by rigorous curriculum and instruction that appropriately and patiently challenges students, instills high expectations, and turns minds onto a lifetime of learning. It recognizes that sometimes “less is more.” It is also measured by the quality and quantity of positive relationships for students with teachers, coaches, peers, and many others. Personalization strategies designed to ensure that students feel important, supported, and able to excel are vital. In all too many communities, the real issue can be summed up by the following question: Is the negative pull of the streets stronger than the positive pull of the classroom? Schools and classrooms must do everything in their power to ensure that students want to be there. Of course, this also means that schools and classrooms should be places where teachers want to be, too.
  
- *Employ Individualized Approaches & Considerations:* Each student is an individual with a unique array of characteristics, such as learning style, strengths, interests, needs, family history, etc. Accordingly, emphasis on individualized approaches must be ever-present in teaching strategies, educational & career pathway options, performance assessments, supportive services, data collection & analysis, etc. Individualized approaches also require the engagement of parents and families in meaningful ways. Attention to unique considerations for students at greater risk of dropping out is critical and must factor into school approaches. School leaders and their partners must demonstrate and employ cultural competency on a number of different levels and should constantly be asking what they are doing to ensure that foster youth and youth aging out of foster care, immigrants, English language learners, special needs students, over-aged middle school students, under-prepared high school students, teen mothers and their children, and other high-risk populations are receiving the support and attention that may be required.

- *There Should be Appropriate Accountability and Incentives at All Levels of Leadership for Ensuring that Students Stay in School and Graduate with a Meaningful Education:* Standardized test scores are and should remain an important element of evaluation and accountability; however, room should be made for school attendance, attachment, graduation rates, and student growth to be deemed as important. Superintendents, boards of education, principals, and teachers should hold themselves and each other accountable for high graduation rates in their districts, schools, and classrooms. In turn, parents, community members, business leaders, and many others should be accountable to help. Providing for this degree of accountability -- with everyone from state officials to superintendents to boards of education to teachers to students to the community at large -- helps to foster the appropriate levels of expectation, anticipated outcomes, and aligned action.
  
- *Current and Future Resources Should Be Aligned with the Value of 100% Graduation:* If keeping all students in school and engaged is truly a priority – with corresponding accountability – schools and districts should have budgets which consistently reflect this priority. In addition to the obvious reasons for keeping kids in school and engaged, there are economic reasons to do so as well. Districts receive a per pupil amount in funding; when students drop out that funding is lost. Keeping those students in school – and recovering those who have dropped out – should mean restoration of that funding. This should be viewed as an incentive for districts. Effective dropout prevention also requires innovative use and alignment of existing financial resources as well as the strategic leveraging of related resources. Schools and districts that are already spending a lot of money without excellent results should examine their approach and consider change --- in some cases, dramatic change.
  
- *Use Technology in a Myriad of Ways to Reach Children & Families and to Support Educators:* In many ways, technology is a continuous theme throughout these guiding principles and through most of the strategies listed below. The term “technology” in schools can have many different meanings in different contexts and times. In general, technology should be used in a myriad of ways to reach students and families, engage them in the classroom and curriculum in innovative and creative ways, challenge and support teachers, and to help schools and school systems to better communicate and be better organized.
  
- *Use Data and Information Systems to Ensure Quality and Positive Outcomes for Students:* Effective schools and school systems rely on data to identify problems, to develop solutions, and to better understand both the intended and

unintended consequences of policy, practice and programs. Accurate data collection at the state and local level is critically important to ensuring accurate measurement of overall progress toward 100% graduation. It also helps to ensure that student attendance, attachment, and achievement is monitored and used to provide an early warning for school administrators to develop intervention strategies that can prevent a child from dropping out in the short or long run. As previously noted, it also means that districts are collecting and analyzing data in a manner that reflects the true dropout rate in their schools.

- *Develop Leadership within Schools and Communities and Provide for an Array of Training Opportunities:* Making 100% graduation a priority and achieving real results requires focused leadership on multiple levels, ranging from state officials to boards of education to building-level principals to community partners to parents and, of course, to students themselves. Establishing this expectation requires strong and sustained communication, appropriate training, and accountability. The New Jersey Department of Education's Office of Leadership Development has already taken important steps to design programs for school leaders who aspire to become transformative facilitators of change. Collectively, we should work together to provide for appropriate multidisciplinary forums, especially with school and community leaders and stakeholders from high dropout rate districts.
- *Employ Comprehensive Approaches which Require Strong Community- School Partnerships:* Keeping children in school and engaged is everyone's responsibility. Of course, schools happen to be one potentially powerful vehicle for effectuating this goal. While dropout prevention most often requires a school centered approach, responsibility rests not only with schools, but also with a broad range of community partners. This is true because students drop out of school for a wide-range of reasons – not simply because school is not challenging or boring. Successful dropout prevention will be realized only when schools and districts are effectively partnering with parents, non-profit and faith-based organizations, corporations & businesses, and other local government agencies in a coordinated and effective manner. School-level leaders and their community counterparts should understand and learn how they need each other and how they can work together in constructive fashion. Partnerships which offer quality after school, enrichment, and mentoring programs; career-focused internship and work experience; curriculum expertise; financial resources; and social and health services are simply a few of what should be limitless possibilities. Effective partnership often requires opportunity for community partners to assume leadership roles in and with schools and to take a proactive active role in strategic planning alongside school leaders. Exciting and innovative options like



full service community schools, the Broader Bolder Approach, and other symbiotic community-school concepts should be explored, especially in schools and districts in need of dramatic change.

- *Fortify the Entire Pipeline from Cradle to College:* An effective 100% graduation strategy begins before birth and continues to and through high school graduation, until the cycle begins anew when a student ultimately becomes a parent. Too often, people think dropout prevention strategies should focus on students who are in or about to enter into high school, or that they should only focus on the students who are already in the process or at risk of dropping out. In fact, dropout prevention should begin as early as possible – with education for parents – and continue throughout the journey of every single child in the pre-k through 12 school system (and beyond). Dropout prevention is not any one program, system, or strategy. Rather, it is a broad and comprehensive approach that should be reflected in many different ways throughout the pipeline. The pipeline must lead to positive educational and career opportunities.
- *Provide Choice, Options, & Innovation:* Students and parents should have a variety of options at the classroom, school, district, and city levels. Within classrooms, instruction should be varied and differentiated to meet the learning styles and preferences of students. Within schools, students should be encouraged to take an active role in their education and explore options relating to personal and career interests, experiential learning opportunities, etc. Within districts, options should be available for different types of schools, especially at the high school level and including “small” and “alternative” school options with an understanding that alternative options should be equal options. Within a city or region, choice and options is meant to include traditional public, charter, and, in some cases, private schools. Collectively, the best of different approaches must be shared in order to promote innovation and spur positive change that benefit as many children and families as possible.

**Pennsylvania - (Average Graduation Rate 2006-83.5 %)**

- *After-School Programs:* After-School programming such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers builds student resiliency and increases student academic performance, which often results in improved school attendance. After-school programs are critical to children and families today, and unfortunately the need is not being adequately addressed. In communities today, 14.3 million children take care of themselves after the school day ends, including almost four million middle school students in grades six to eight. Just 6.5 million children are in after school programs - but the parents of another 15.3 million children say their children would participate in after school - if a program were available.
- *Alternative Education:* Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth Programs, funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, are designed to provide intense, individualized instruction and behavior counseling to students who are "disruptive" in the regular classroom. The program can include many program interventions - such as counseling - to help pinpoint the cause of behavior issues, such as truancy, and provide supports or assistance to the students and their families. Alternative education programs provide an individualized academic program for each student. Much of the curriculum is self-paced and students can learn at their own ability rate and method. They are more rapidly engaged because teachers make accommodations with multiple teaching styles that may include experiential learning and community service.
- *Club Ophelia:* Club Ophelia is an after school program that takes place once a week for 90 minutes over a twelve week time period. Two adult directors with counseling backgrounds, a community volunteer, 5-6 high school junior mentors, and 30 middle school girls participate in an arts based curriculum designed to overcome relational aggression.

1) The first step is to EDUCATE about relational aggression using stories that illustrate female bullying. Girls then share bullying situations from their own lives, and create role plays that act out the hurtful behaviors they have seen or been involved in.

2) The next step is having girls RELATE the information on relational aggression to their own lives, by examining the relationships the girls have or want to develop, looking at what makes someone a friend, and discussing what qualities each girl brings into her relationships with peers. Each group of girls is asked to "replay" their original situations using two alternative endings that show a positive outcome.

3) The final step is to ask the girls to INTEGRATE what they have learned into their lives, and to think about how they could help another girl who is a victim *or a bully*.

*21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC):* The 21st CCLC Program provides an opportunity for students and their families to continue to learn new skills and discover new abilities after the school day has ended. The focus of this program, re-authorized under Title IV, Part B, of the No Child Left Behind Act, is to provide expanded academic enrichment opportunities for children attending low performing schools. Tutorial services and academic enrichment activities are designed to help students meet local and state academic standards in subjects such as reading and math. In addition 21st CCLC

Programs provide youth development activities, drug and violence prevention programs, technology education programs, art, music and recreation programs, counseling and character education to enhance the academic component of the program.

### **Minnesota – (Average Graduation Rate 2006-86.2 %)**

*Minnesota Department of Education Dropout Prevention Initiative: Dropout Prevention Strategies and Programming.* The following pages list programming and strategies that are being used by seven participating districts (high school and middle school level) in the MDE Dropout Prevention Initiative. For each strategy area, programs are listed, along with the level of intervention (universal – for all students; secondary – for some students with identified risk; or tertiary – for relatively few students showing clear risk of dropping out of school) and desired impact. The Minnesota Department of Education’s (MDE) Dropout Prevention Initiative is utilizing ten effective dropout prevention strategies (identified by the National Dropout Prevention Center) as a framework that can be used to assist educators, administrators, community members, and parents with promoting student engagement in school and raising rates of graduation. Emphasis is placed on tailoring programming within the strategy areas to meet community, school and student needs.

*The strategies include:*

1. Professional Development
2. School-Community Collaboration

3. Family Engagement
4. Safe Learning Environments
5. Active/Individualized Learning
6. Literacy Development
7. Mentoring/Tutoring
8. After-School Opportunities
9. Service-Learning
10. Alternative Schooling

**Vermont – (Average Graduation Rate 2006-82.3 %)**

- *Roots of Success:* The Vermont Department of Education, with the help of an advisory panel representing K-12 schools and higher education, studied what it takes for schools—and therefore students, particularly low-income students,—to succeed. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods was employed to identify the characteristics common to effective schools. Through a large-scale survey of more than 2000 Vermont teachers in 87 schools across the state as well as intensive site visits to three schools that are “beating the odds” (schools whose Reading and Mathematics scores on state assessments defy expectations and exceed those of other schools with similar demographics), the panel discovered a set of attitudes and beliefs as well as specific school practices that are associated with student, particularly low-income, success. These characteristics form the foundation for school effectiveness and are essential to ensuring that all children, regardless of background or socioeconomic status, reach their full potential.

1. High expectations  
Effective systems believe that all students can succeed.
2. Continuous improvement  
Effective systems take responsibility for students’ achievement and therefore work to continually improve their own practice.
3. Leadership

Effective systems are guided by strong leadership.

4. Use of data  
Effective systems use data in an ongoing way to provide feedback to staff as well as monitor and support students.
5. Professional teaching culture  
Effective systems establish a professional teaching culture that supports high-quality instruction.
6. Student supports  
Effective systems have a comprehensive and highly functioning support system in place to address students' academic, emotional, behavioral, and social needs.
7. School climate  
Effective systems create a supportive climate that makes all students, as well as adults, feel valued and safe.
8. Family engagement  
Effective systems build constructive relationships with families and involve them in their child's learning.

### **Effective, Non-HFI Programs in Alabama**

Research of several counties in Northeast Alabama indicated that all have some type of truancy policy in-force, however, very few counties enforce their policy. The truancy programs in the school systems in these counties work in many different ways. In Alabama, there is no standard for ensuring truancy is addressed by each school system, nor is there currently one mechanism in place to monitor and effectively combat truancy statewide. As it stands now, each school system that has a truancy program has to determine what will work for them through trial and error. Not all school systems in Alabama are positioned to effectively create a school truancy program within their system due to the lack of personnel, funding or interest.

#### **Marshall County**

It has a program to help with truancy that actively involves the Juvenile Probation Office. Starting from Kindergarten thru 12<sup>th</sup> grade, truant students are given one warning. Any of which, the student must begin a discipline based program. A more drastic measure for addressing discipline problems that cause truancy in Marshall County is youth "boot camp". Furthermore, parents of truant youth can face jail time as well for their children(s) actions.

According to Stacie S. Jenkins, a Juvenile Probation Officer with Marshall County, there are other, less drastic programs in Marshall County that address truancy in the school system.

### **Jackson County**

It has implemented a program at Pisgah High School called the *Hybrid Schedule*. Students reduce each regular class meeting by several minutes. This allows for additional class time for all students. The struggling students are allowed the allotted saved time, three days a week, for remedial classes to include instruction on graduation exams. This allows for credit recovery and time for make-up classes missed. It also eliminates instructional interruptions. The Advanced students use this time for Advanced Placement classes taken online. It will also allow students to take enrichment type classes such as scholars bowl, math team, debate, as well as many others. Average students are also offered opportunity to advance themselves academically. Other non-traditional classes are offered such as outdoors, photography, fishing, scrabble.

Since implementing this program at Pisgah High School no senior has failed to receive a diploma due to the graduation exam. The ASA scores were also above 90% in each grade level. According to the staff and the students at Pisgah High the program definitely works. (PHS)

Other school systems are looking at the hybrid program that Pisgah High School has implemented. According to an article in The Gadsden Times, Etowah County High School in Attalla implemented the hybrid school schedule in January 2010 and modeled there schedule after Pisgah High School. Even though these school systems may be looking into the student dropouts in different ways they both show some promise of providing some guidance to youth.

### **“Helping Families Initiatives” in Alabama**

The Mobile County Public School System is the largest school system in the State of Alabama. With the support of the Mobile County Public School System, the District Attorney’s Office created a partnership with the schools in an attempt to provide intervention and services to truant and other at-risk children and their families. The goal was to prevent truancy and disruptive behavior in children.

Through extensive research by the Mobile County District Attorney’s Office and the Mobile County Public School System it was determined that truancy is linked to educational failure in youth years and drastically increasing the likelihood of dropping out of school. Guided by these findings, the Mobile County District Attorney and the school system initially focused on preventing truancy by creating the “Make the Right Choice” Early Warning Truancy Prevention

Program, which brought habitually truant students and their families into a courtroom for a program led by a prosecutor and supported by school truancy officers. Although effective, this program did not get to the root of the problem: the family and home life of the truant student.

In 2003, the Mobile County District Attorney (DA) gave birth to the Helping Families Initiative (HFI). The HFI program is a framework for identifying and offering intervention services through an array of community resources. The DA formed partnerships with local agencies in an HFI team which included the school system, social services, faith based community, mental health, community service organizations, local police and other local agencies. The major responsibility for implementing, managing, and evaluating the outcomes of this initiative lies with the DA's office.

HFI is designed to provide early intervention to youth who are truant or who are suspended for committing serious violations of the Student Code of Conduct. By design, the student's behavior triggers the intervention. The process consists of four major components:

- Identify youth who are most at risk
- Engage each youth and his or her family in discussing the need for change
- Refer the youth and his or her family to the appropriate agency or organization and deliver the services needed
- Measure outcomes and report progress

Case officers working with the DA's office use the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale to assess the family situation and develop a case file. This tool is an assessment and measurement of family functioning in the areas of environment, parental capabilities, family interactions, family safety, child well-being, social/community life, self-sufficiency and family health to develop target services to families.

The case file is then presented to the HFI team. Team members review cases to determine what intervention is warranted. The team informs parents that their participation is NOT optional. Parents or guardians are reminded that they are morally and legally responsible for helping their child correct the misbehavior and become reinstated in school. The HFI program makes clear to parents or guardians that they must take ownership of their parental responsibilities and offers families the assistance they need to accomplish this goal.

In schools, educators are overwhelmed. Teachers and principals are often left to their own devices without community support in dealing with school discipline problems. Despite the promising programs implemented in Alabama's schools, such as increased dropout age and graduation coaches, the home is the root of most problems which manifest in schools.

Educators have no jurisdiction or authority to enforce any participation of improvements in the home situation. This is where one of the attributes of the DA's HFI program can be successful because- they have legal enforceability that the schools just do not have.

In Mobile County, the biggest proponent of the HFI program has been the school system superintendent's office. This program is a K-12 program. While the largest drop-out age group is ninth graders, many of the problems of those ninth graders may have started years earlier (See Appendix A for samples of case studies).

The Mobile County HFI program has been used as a model by various District Attorneys and school districts throughout Alabama. Some systems have adopted variations of this program which are tailored to each system. The systems most researched for the purpose of this project in addition to Mobile County were Autauga/Elmore Counties, Tallassee City Schools, Montgomery County and Lowndes County.

A representative of the Autauga/Elmore school system learned of Mobile County's HFI at a speaking engagement featuring Mobile County District Attorney John Tyson. The representative approached the local District Attorney Randall Houston about implementing the program in his district. Through a combined effort of support and resources between the District Attorney and Superintendent's Office the Autauga/Elmore Helping Families Initiative was put into place in Autauga and Elmore Counties as well as Tallassee City Schools in September, 2007.

The Autauga Elmore HFI staff consists of a Director and two case officers. With limited space in the District Attorney's Office, the HFI team is located in office space provided by the local Superintendent of Education. The Autauga Elmore HFI receives referrals from the schools for students with seven or more unexcused absences and for suspensions or repeated disciplinary actions. The staff performs a home assessment and develops a plan tailored to the needs of the individual student and family and contacts various organizations in the community with resources needed to assist the student and families.

Schools in the Autauga Elmore district are located both in urban and rural areas, therefore the needs of students and their families may vary greatly according to the location of the home or school. As a result of frequent visits to homes and contact with families, the case workers are able to create a partnership not only with the community, but with the families.

It did not take long for the Autauga Elmore HFI to become widely accepted within the school system and community. At the end of the 2008/2009 school year, a survey was completed by every Autauga County school that HFI has received referrals from. The results of the survey are overwhelmingly positive. A copy of this survey is provided in Appendix B.



Montgomery County's District Attorney Ellen Brooks created a version of HFI, which is referred to as Helping Montgomery Families Initiative (HMFI). HMFI began providing intervention and prevention services to Montgomery Public Schools students and families in February, 2008 as a pilot program in 10 schools. The program expanded to all schools in March, 2008. During the first year of service, over fifty partnerships were created for the purpose of coordinating students and families to existing services in the community. The students targeted were those students who received suspensions for serious disciplinary infractions as defined by the Montgomery Public Schools Code of Conduct.

If a student receives more than one suspension the HMFI case officer assigned completes a family assessment. The case is then presented to a Multi-Disciplinary Team for the purpose of assisting with an individualized intervention plan. The Multi-Disciplinary Team includes representatives from fourteen community organizations who meet on a weekly basis to assist with the development of individual plans for the students and their families. A comprehensive listing of organizations that comprise the Multi-Disciplinary Team are listed in Appendix C.

The success of HMFI has prompted Montgomery Public Schools to create a pilot program to combat alarming truancy levels in three Montgomery schools. This pilot program will begin in the 2010-2011 school term. The participating schools will send referrals for students with five or more unexcused absences to HMFI. A comprehensive assessment of the family unit will take place and the student and families will work with the Multi-Disciplinary Team in the same manner that is currently in place for suspended students.

The Lowndes County HFI began serving students and families in Lowndes County in 2008. Funding for the program was provided entirely by the Lowndes County District Attorney. Office space was provided by the local Board of Education. The program faced challenges such as a lack of acceptance by school officials, family resistance and funding. Unfortunately, the lack of funding caused the Lowndes County HFI to be discontinued in June, 2010.

As set out in §16-28-12, Code of Alabama, 1975, District Attorneys are required to vigorously enforce the law to ensure proper conduct and required attendance by any child enrolled in public school (See Appendix D). Through HFI programs implemented in only a few districts in the State of Alabama, these District Attorneys have created an innovative and highly effective way to address a responsibility of their offices.

The one common factor of the most successful HFIs programs is the collaboration between the District Attorneys and the Superintendents of Education. Without both parties working together for the good of the student, success of the program is hampered. In each successful program the District Attorney and the Superintendent welcomed the collaboration, involved

the community and combined resources in an effort to identify and intercept Alabama students headed toward an unsuccessful experience in public school.

Of the districts in Alabama that have tried and failed to implement HFI Programs, all of them lacked an obvious collaborative effort among the local parties. Misconceptions in the community, concerns over job territory and general lack of understanding of the program are common. With funding and resources originating from a single source, it is difficult for multiple organizations to feel the sense of partnership that is fostered in programs with combined resources.

Although the HFI Programs researched are all fundamentally the same, they are individually unique. The collaborative efforts of District Attorneys and Superintendents working to create a program tailored to suit the needs of a specific district and the resources therein have proven to be far superior to a “cookie cutter” approach for all districts. These programs, despite funding struggles, long hours and daily challenges remain firm in the belief that the student’s home life is directly related to his or her successful completion of school.

#### **Recommendation Addressing Alabama’s Drop-out Rate: “The BRIDGE”**

Education is the key to success for our children and communities. Many children face challenges on a daily basis that impede their ability to be successful in school. It takes a community to ensure that our children are provided with a safe and secure environment to learn through the use of efficient, effective continuum of interventions that can be tailored to the needs of the child and the family utilizing all of the judicial, prosecutorial and social service assets in the community. Children who are given the necessary resources to enhance their ability to attend school regularly and to achieve some success are less likely to enter the juvenile justice system.

The BRIDGE is a collaborative effort that will be lead by the District Attorney in partnership with the local school board. The collaboration will include local law enforcement, healthcare professionals, mental health, social services, juvenile justice agencies and other community organizations with the primary charge of providing intervention services for suspended (but not charged with a criminal offense) and truant students and their families. This program is modeled after HFI –type programs in Mobile, Elmore, Autauga and Montgomery counties.

There are many key factors in the success of this program to include; adequate funding, law enforcement authority and collaboration.

Adequate funding of this program is essential to its success. Personnel and their benefits should be funded through a source that would be least likely to be cut. The funding could be routed to the District Attorney's office for disbursement. The District Attorney's office has been charged to enforce section 16-28-12 of the Code of Alabama to ensure proper conduct and required attendance by any child enrolled in public school. The District Attorney's Office has law enforcement power and jurisdiction with the ability to provide guidance and assistance with non-law enforcement hands.

As per the Code of Alabama section 16-28-12 the superintendent of education of the school system that a child enrolled in public school fails to regularly attend or fails to properly conduct himself or herself in accordance with the written policy on school behavior and results in the suspension of the child, the suspension must be reported to the District Attorney's office. The school has 10 days to report the suspension. The personnel of the program will review this report to determine suspensions for serious disciplinary infractions, habitual truancy and determine if the child is already in the juvenile justice system. If the child is in the juvenile justice system, then the child's probation officer is contacted regarding the unacceptable behavior.

For those children that meet the criteria of the BRIDGE program, the first letter of concern is sent to the parents or guardians of the child from the District Attorney's office. If no other suspension or truancy occurs, no additional contact is needed. However, the student will be tracked for the remainder of the school year by personnel of the BRIDGE.

If an additional suspension or truancy occurs, a letter of assessment is sent to the parents or guardians of the child. An assessment of the family by personnel of the BRIDGE is required utilizing the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale-General (NCFAS-G). This tool is an assessment and measurement of family functioning in the areas of environment, parental capabilities, family interactions, family safety, child well-being, social/community life, self-sufficiency and family health to develop target services to families. Once the assessment is complete, the case officer presents the assessment to a multi-disciplinary team. The multi-disciplinary team should be comprised of personnel from local law enforcement agencies, juvenile court system, public school system, public health department, human resources, mental health authority, boys and girls club and counseling centers, to develop an individualized intervention plan to address the families' specific and unique needs and strengthen the family as a whole by linking the family to services within the community. A partnership with a diverse array of community service providers need to be developed to serve as a source for referral for children and families.

The Individualized Intervention Plan would be monitored for compliance and effectiveness by personnel of the BRIDGE program throughout the remainder of the school year.

### **Funding for the BRIDGE Program**

The number one goal and most logical source of regular funding is a line item on the Education Trust Fund (ETF) earmarking funds for the Office of Prosecution Services (OPS) for administrative costs including salary and benefits of at least a director and a case worker for each judicial circuit. OPS could then administer funds at a certain rate per student in each district.

This would provide an entity to hold a state-wide position over the proposed BRIDGE Program for administering funds while still allowing the District Attorneys in those districts to run their programs according to their specific needs. OPS could also keep some of the administrative funds to fill a position that would work to identify state level funding sources for the individual programs allows local directors to solicit funds from locals who already are familiar with them.

The ETF funds would not be enough to cover every cost. The director of each circuit should spend some time lobbying the local entities for funds and grants. The first place a district director should begin lobbying for funds is with the local governments by asking that a portion of the local money given to education be earmarked for a BRIDGE program. Our research indicates any entity can donate funds or services regardless of this program's link to a state agency. The local directors may contact local charities, faith based organizations, individuals, companies for donations of funds or charity services. The HFI can also open a membership as a United Way entity. HFI programs can apply for local grants.

Funding for an HFI is a real possibility with the endorsement and backing of the DAs who lobby for this program and also cultivate a desire for the program from educational superintendents.

Revenues in the State of Alabama are down, proration has been declared, school systems and other state agencies struggle to meet financial obligations. Could there be a worse time to suggest an additional line item on the Education Trust Fund Budget? Would it be more affordable to the citizens of Alabama to bear the burdens of fellow citizens who failed to complete school and are unable to sufficiently support themselves?

It has been estimated by the Mobile County HFI Director that the program in the largest school district in the State of Alabama costs approximately five dollars per student in the system per year. Five dollars per student is the cost of one lunch per student. While that amount does not

allow for all of the furnishings, equipment or sufficient office supplies, it covers the conservative salaries and nominal expenses for the dedicated personnel who enter the homes of strangers and change their lives forever. If a case worker is able to save one student from a lifetime on public assistance everyone benefits.

In the Autauga Elmore HFI office space there is one shared computer among a staff of three. There are second-hand lawn chairs for furnishings. Yet, from that less than lavish space children are saved from hopeless situations and headed toward success.

In Montgomery County, the successes have led to additional pilot programs and plans to continue to expand their valuable services to all school children in the Montgomery Public Schools. Additional services require additional funds.

Each of these three HFIs are funded with a combination of resources. The one area where no statewide standard of funding exists is in the basic area of salaries and benefits for the staff. With salaries in some HFIs dependent upon grants and donations the programs will struggle with continuity of staff, which ultimately affects the students and families who depend on them as their hope for success. The directors of these programs are accomplished at fundraising but more accomplished at changing lives.

With a state wide program in place and funding for at least a basic staff, the program directors and case workers can spend more time in the homes and less time procuring funds. HFIs located in economically depressed areas of the state will be able to offer their families the same life-changing services as HFIs in more economically fortunate areas of the state.

This investment will be an additional expense to the citizens of Alabama that has the potential to reduce the dropout rate of Alabama students like no other program has. The result of the investment is a self-sufficient Alabama citizen capable of employment. Without the investment, that same Alabama citizen will be unemployable and drain the coffers of the State of Alabama for the duration of his or her lifetime. Which can the citizens better afford?

### **Summary**

Whether a person is convinced by a written statement, a financial chart or common sense, every person from every walk of life knows the importance of an education and the detrimental effects of the lack of one. Statistics to substantiate the importance of an education are overwhelming in every state in the nation.

The Department of Education continues to make strides to implement new processes in schools in an attempt to address the high school dropout problem in Alabama. Graduation coaches have been placed in schools and the minimum required age for a student to leave school without parental permission has been increased. Alternative programs are offered and counselors are made available, yet the problem persists.

In discussing the problem of the high school dropout rate, it is impossible come to any conclusion regarding the cause of this problem that does not include the home life of the student. Yet, this is the area over which educators in Alabama have no jurisdiction. Educators have a major influence in the life of the child until the school day ends. They have no influence over the child when they are sent to homes which may be the source of the student's likelihood of failure, in many cases despite the parent or guardian's best efforts.

The Mandatory School Attendance Act of 1927 requires that:

- Parents must enroll their children in school
- Parents must ensure children go to school
- Parents must ensure children stay in school
- Parents must ensure children behave in school

The Alabama Legislature went further in attempts to meet these requirements by adopting §16-28-12, Code of Alabama, 1975, requiring all Alabama District Attorneys to vigorously enforce school attendance laws. With this duty, the District Attorneys have the jurisdiction to become involved in the lives of students in an area the schools cannot – the home.

With the element of enforceability, unconcerned parents must accept the intervention. It is not optional. At first glance, involvement of the District Attorney may appear to be a punishment which surely will not help the problem. Upon further knowledge of the Helping Families Initiative (HFI) implemented in a few counties of Alabama, it is overwhelmingly evident that it is a law enforcement program performing as a social agency in most cases. Although there are cases that include parental incarceration as a last resort if the parents refuse to participate in a plan of success for their children, each HFI director will surely attest that those cases are shadowed by the large volume of cases where parents or guardians welcomed intervention with open arms and joyful tears of relief knowing someone was there for them.

Perhaps one must see the faces of the HFI directors when they speak of success stories. Perhaps one must hear a young lady about to graduate and enter college tell of the days when she was in a perpetual cycle of disruptive behavior in school to know that this program touches

lives. Perhaps one needs to hear of a kindergarten student so aggressive that he physically attacked a principal, but became a model student once his illiterate parent was taught how not to overmedicate him.

Success stories don't come easily. It is a fact that for this program to work there must be a hub of collaboration among the District Attorneys, the Superintendents, local law enforcement and local organizations. It is also a fact that just the right person must fill the shoes of a director and a case worker. It isn't a job for the insincere. It is a job for a person who can look into the eyes of kids from kindergarten to the twelfth grade and convince those children that they are worth the effort.

Funding is needed and while money isn't the answer to everything, far more money goes annually to the support of uneducated Alabamians than it will cost to place this program in each judicial district of Alabama. This program needs a champion. It needs someone who will see it for the near miracle that it is and convince the Legislature that it is worth consideration for funding. Funding for this program will allow the students and the homes that are out of reach of the education system to be reached.

The children of today are the elders of tomorrow. A disproportionate amount of them will enter tomorrow without the armor of an education. No one organization or person can prevent that from happening. A collaboration of all resources is imperative. It can work. It is working now in a few counties in the State of Alabama. The model program suggested as a result of this project is largely based on the success of the Helping Family Initiatives. It is referred to as the Bridge Program because it can serve as a bridge to connect all school aged children in Alabama to the intervention services and resources that are currently available to only those served by an HFI. It is an opportunity to bridge the gap between the school and the home and to lead the youth of Alabama to the success they all deserve.

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The Honorable Terri Bozeman Lovell,  
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## Case stories from the Helping Families Initiative

Crime, victims of crime, hunger, addiction, mental illness, homelessness.

These are just a few of the desperate circumstances that the team from the Helping Families Initiative encountered in the first year of operation.

With unprecedented teamwork among all the partners and the entire community, HFI team members work to cut red tape and offer services and solutions to at-risk youth and their families early enough to intervene effectively.

- *A teenage girl – a “throwaway kid” – on the verge of a life of drug abuse and sexual exploitation finds refuge in a group home.*
- *Four abused and neglected children are rescued from a crack house and get a taste of normal life with foster parents.*
- *A 4<sup>th</sup>-grader overturns school furniture in a rage, threatens to kill faculty and students, stands on top of his desk and screams at the teacher. At home, he blackens his frail grandmother’s eye and is suspected of setting fires and torturing animals. The boy is picked up and put into safekeeping until his medications are corrected. Under professional supervision, his behavior improves.*
- *A mom and dad “at wit’s end” with their teenaged daughter get help with the child’s addiction – a problem they were unaware of until Helping Families Initiative intervention.*
- *A wide range of family assistance services help the troubled families of several middle school girls discovered to be engaging in ritual self-mutilation.*
- *A high-school student destined to drop out gets the support and encouragement he needs to finish high school and enroll in community college.*

***“We noticed the mood swings,  
but we had no idea she was  
doing drugs.”***

-- Father

***“I didn’t know what to do. I  
couldn’t get to work before they  
were calling me with problems  
about my son.”***

-- Mother

## Survey Data

The following survey was completed by every Autauga County school that HFI has worked in. School administrators were asked to complete the survey and return it anonymously.

- 1 = strongly agree
- 2 = agree
- 3 = no opinion
- 4 = disagree
- 5 = strongly disagree

1. I want to see the Helping Families Initiative (HFI) continue into the 2009/2010 school year.

Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
89%	11%	0	0	0

2. From my perspective HFI has helped to increase parental involvement/cooperation in my school.

Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Does not Apply
78%	11%	0	0	0	11%

3. From my perspective HFI is a valuable resource for my students.

Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
78%	22%	0	0	0

4. From my perspective HFI is a valuable resource to assist with disciplinary action for students in my school.

Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Does not Apply

89%	0	11%	0	0	0
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**5. From my perspective HFI is a valuable resource to assist with inadequate attendance for students in my school.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Does not Apply
78%	11%	0	0	0	11%

**6. Leslie Ekdahl, HFI Program Director visits my school regularly.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
89%	11%	0	0	0

**7. Leslie Ekdahl, HFI Program Director is accessible and responsive to my needs.**

Strongly Agree	Agree	No Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
89%	11%	0	0	0

**COMMENTS (please include suggestions for ways to improve):**

- Leslie Ekdahl was an asset to my school and to the students under her care.
- I would love to see this program continue.
- Sometimes she seems to be the difference in helping a student from dropping out of school.
- The students appreciate her acts of concern as well as the school.
- Helping Families Initiative has provided valuable assistance and support to the school and students. Leslie has reached out to students and offered them hope and someone on whom they can depend and on whom they can trust.
- I appreciate the way Leslie helps to hold parents accountable.
- She speaks for children who cannot speak out for themselves.

- Thank you Leslie!
- The Helping Families initiative is vital to my school and the families they serve.
- Mrs. Ekdahl does an outstanding job working with students and parents before they get into more serious trouble with the law.
- She has compassion for those served yet is firm when need be.
- She is a very important link in the total services provided to parents and our community.
- We have enjoyed working with Leslie and believe the program is beneficial to both the school and our students.
- Don't lose this program!
- This is truly of value to me as a principal.
- Please allow this program to continue!

## Two Stories of Families Aided by HMF

### Andrew

"Andrew" is a 10 year old elementary student who received numerous disciplinary infractions including criminal mischief and five harassment infractions which resulted in eight suspensions. School officials expressed their concerns for this family, particularly truancy and safety issues involving the children. The assessment process revealed that Andrew's mother was suffering from mental illness and was not receiving treatment. Andrew had assumed the parental role which explained his numerous tardies, absences and negative behaviors. Andrew also has eight siblings, some with special needs. He was responsible for taking care of the siblings including preparing their daily breakfast. However, during school hours it was the expectation from other adults that he be a child and respect authority which was a difficult transition for him to make. It was apparent through the assessment process and observations made by the assigned HMF Case Officer, that mom was mentally unable to provide care for her children. The living environment was considered unsafe for this family. The assessment process brought this heartbreaking situation to light in the MDT meeting and resulted in DHR providing services to the children and their mother.

### Angela

"Angela" is a 12 year old elementary school student who received 11 disciplinary infractions during the 2007-2008 school term, seven of which resulted in out of school suspensions. The suspensions were primarily for aggressive behaviors such as hitting, kicking, punching and fighting. The interventions prescribed by the MDT were to assist Angela with anger management, aggressive behaviors, poor peer relationships, and lack of respect for authority figures. All aspects of the Intervention Plan (IIP) were followed by the family. As a result, Angela was promoted to the next grade level in 2008. During the current school term, she has experienced more success in school and is on track to be promoted again in 2009. According to school administrators and her guardians, Angela has been able to avoid physical confrontations with her classmates. She has actively made the choice not to hit when in the past this was her instant response when she was angry.

### Multi-Disciplinary Team

- ◆ Boys & Girls Club of Montgomery
- ◆ Center for Adolescent & Child Development
- ◆ DA-HMF
- ◆ Lighthouse Counseling Center
- ◆ Montgomery Area Mental Health Authority
- ◆ Montgomery County Department of Human Resources
- ◆ Montgomery County Juvenile Court
- ◆ Montgomery County Public Health Department
- ◆ Montgomery County Sheriff's Office
- ◆ Montgomery Police Department
- ◆ Montgomery Public Schools
- ◆ Partners in Education
- ◆ Sunshine Center
- ◆ YMCA

### Initial Funding Sources

- ◆ Alabama Department of Economic Development
- ◆ Capital City Kiwanis Club
- ◆ Central Alabama Community Foundation
- ◆ City of Montgomery
- ◆ First United Methodist Church
- ◆ Greil Foundation
- ◆ Montgomery County Commission
- ◆ Montgomery Public Schools System
- ◆ Retired Mens Club
- ◆ Safe Schools/Healthy Students-Federal Grant
- ◆ The Women's Giving Circle

**Section 16-28-12**

**Person in loco parentis responsible for child's school attendance and behavior; noncompliance; local boards to promulgate written behavior policy, contents, annual distribution, receipt to be documented; school officials required to report noncompliance; failure to report suspected violation; district attorneys vigorously to enforce provisions.**

(a) Each parent, guardian, or other person having control or custody of any child required to attend school or receive regular instruction by a private tutor who fails to have the child enrolled in school or who fails to send the child to school, or have him or her instructed by a private tutor during the time the child is required to attend a public school, private school, church school, denominational school, or parochial school, or be instructed by a private tutor, or fails to require the child to regularly attend the school or tutor, or fails to compel the child to properly conduct himself or herself as a pupil in any public school in accordance with the written policy on school behavior adopted by the local board of education pursuant to this section and documented by the appropriate school official which conduct may result in the suspension of the pupil, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and, upon conviction, shall be fined not more than one hundred dollars (\$100) and may also be sentenced to hard labor for the county for not more than 90 days. The absence of a child without the consent of the principal teacher of the public school he or she attends or should attend, or of the tutor who instructs or should instruct the child, shall be prima facie evidence of the violation of this section.

(b) Each local public board of education shall adopt a written policy for its standards on school behavior. Each local public school superintendent shall provide at the commencement of each academic year a copy of the written policy on school behavior to each parent, guardian, or other person having care or control of a child who is enrolled. Included in the written policy shall be a copy of this section. The signature of the student and the parent, guardian, or other person having control or custody of the child shall document receipt of the policy.

(c) Any parent, guardian, or other person having control or custody of any child enrolled in public school who fails to require the child to regularly attend the school or tutor, or fails to compel the child to properly conduct himself or herself as a pupil in accordance with the written policy on school behavior adopted by the local board of education and documented by the appropriate school official which conduct may result in the suspension of the pupil, shall be reported by the principal to the superintendent of education of the school system in which the suspected violation occurred. The superintendent of education or his or her designee shall report suspected violations to the district attorney within 10 days. Any principal or superintendent of education or his or her designee intentionally failing to report a suspected violation shall be guilty of a Class C misdemeanor. The district attorney shall vigorously enforce this section to ensure proper conduct and required attendance by any child enrolled in public school.

*(School Code 1927, §305; Code 1940, T. 52, §302; Acts 1993, No. 93-672, p. 1213, §1; Acts 1994, 1st Ex. Sess., No. 94-782, p. 70, §1.)*

