



NEWS RELEASE

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Communities, State Adopt Rally Cry to Boost Student Graduation

“Graduation Matters in Missouri” is the message of employers, educators, public agencies and even former dropouts. State education officials are using the new slogan, released at the 2009 Missouri Dropout Prevention Summit, to emphasize the importance of high school graduation at a time when the state’s dropout rate has been creeping upward.

“Dropping out of school has serious consequences – for students, their families, the community and our state,” said Missouri Commissioner of Education Chris L. Nicastro. “Dropouts often face a lifetime of lower wages, higher unemployment and an increased risk of incarceration. We need to focus on reducing the dropout rate across Missouri.”

After falling for close to a decade, Missouri’s dropout rate reached a low in 2003 of 3.3 percent of students. But in the following five years, the annual rate began ticking back up and was at 4.2 percent for 2007-08. That’s more than 12,000 students who left school that year, which translates to about 70 students dropping out each school day.

“Students who are at risk of dropping out aren’t moved by statistics about consequences,” Nicastro said. “To truly help them, educators, local communities, and even state government must get personal and find solutions that fit these students’ lives.”

While the dropout problem is particularly harsh for poor and minority populations, it affects communities and school districts of all sizes and characteristics.

“Graduation is exceptionally important to us,” said Dan Edwards, associate superintendent for middle schools and high schools in the St. Louis Public Schools.

“Addressing the dropout problem really requires an understanding of what the problems are,” he said. “Poverty and other social challenges our students face are increasing, not lessening. Quite obviously, traditional ways do not work very well, so we have to be innovative and work together in ways that will make options and resources available to help students be successful.”

The statewide [Dropout Prevention Summit](#) held this spring called more than 140 communities to action. The summit's aims were to increase awareness, encourage collaboration and facilitate action in communities with higher-than-average dropout rates.

Among those participating in the statewide summit were the Carthage, Joplin, Carl Junction and Webb City school districts. These four districts in southwest Missouri have formed an alliance to improve their graduation rates.

"We're trying to raise public awareness that this is all of our responsibility," said Webb City Superintendent Ron Lankford. "We all have to be saying, 'Education is important.' The more people we get saying the same thing, the more we can resonate the message."

To start, the four-district alliance is exploring getting businesses and other partners to help carry pro-education messages. The goal is to create a mindset through "a barrage of information" for students and their parents. "We want people to hear 'Graduation Matters' so much, that they come to see graduation as something that's expected," Lankford said.

Solutions are being considered at every level, from local communities to the state legislature. This year, for example, the Missouri Legislature enacted a new law that requires students to stay in school until they are 17 or have completed 16 credits toward graduation. Previously, students could drop out at age 16.

The Missouri House of Representatives also has named a Task Force on Dropout Prevention that has begun studying the state's dropout issues. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, with the help of the summit participants, also is examining policies, incentives and best practices across the state. Other agencies, such as the Division of Youth Services, the Department of Health, and the Department of Mental Health, are at the table, working to identify barriers to graduation.

"The state has a major interest in finding solutions to the dropout problem and helping improve student achievement across the board – so that all students can meet rising academic expectations," Nicastro said. "Cutting the dropout rate provides tangible rewards for everybody, but this is a problem that schools, parents and community leaders must tackle together."

More information is available on the Dropout Prevention page of the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Web site at www.dese.mo.gov/dropoutprevention.

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More information is available at http://dese.mo.gov/divcareered/missouri_connections_news_room.htm.

The Missouri Connections Public Outreach Partnership workgroup represents a collaboration of state agencies concerned with education and workforce development who are helping inform and build awareness among the public, particularly students and potential students, of targeted careers, educational and industry trends, and workforce development priorities. Workgroup members represent the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; Department of Higher Education; Department of Economic Development, Division of Workforce Development and Missouri Economic Research & Information Center; Missouri Center for Career Education; and Missouri Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Freelance writer is Anita Neal Harrison.