

A Model Approach: Dropout Prevention in Mississippi

FACTS ON DROPOUT PREVENTION

Mississippi Code: Title 37 Education § 37-13-80 led to the establishment of the state's Office of Dropout Prevention. Housed within the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), the overall mission of the Office of Dropout Prevention is to reduce the state truancy rate by 50% and the state dropout rate to 13% by the 2012 - 2013 school year. It also aims to increase the graduation rate to 85% by the 2018 - 2019 school year. Since establishing its Office of Dropout Prevention (ODP), MDE has worked extensively in developing dropout prevention programs.

Mississippi Dropout Prevention Plan

The ODP's Dropout Prevention Plan serves as a model for districts throughout Mississippi to develop district-level dropout prevention plans. The state plan consists of several components for each district to implement on a local level. The components are as follows:

Component 1: Public Relations Dropout Prevention Awareness Campaign. Public Relations has

been an integral component of ODP's Dropout Prevention Plan. Through its *On the Bus* campaign, it launched television spots and a web site to create a consistent and marketable message.

Component 2: An Assessment of Current Initiatives. The Office of Dropout Prevention conducted a statewide and federal analysis of Mississippi's existing dropout initiatives. They based their assessment of the initiatives on the National Dropout Prevention Center's *15 Effective Strategies* (see *15 Effective Strategies fact sheet*).

Component 3: School Attendance Officer (SAO) Staff Refocusing Study. One component of the Mississippi plan is to reconsider roles and responsibility of the SAO, more specifically, the plan states, "The purpose of the SAO staff refocusing study will be to explore ways in which the current roles and responsibilities of the SAO's can be refocused so that SAO's may become the district-level specialists in the work of dropout prevention."¹

Component 4: Dropout Recovery Program. For students beyond



MDE launched *On the Bus*, a public awareness campaign to support its efforts, in 2008. As a result of the fairly new campaign, "Mississippi is leading the nation in attacking the dropout problem," according to Kathy Havens Payne, senior director of Education Leadership for State Farm, who partnered with America's Promise Alliance to fund the *On the Bus* campaign. The campaign is a public awareness one that includes:

- TV Commercials,
- Radio Spots,
- Print and Outdoor Advertising,
- Community Outreach, and
- Business Partnerships.

The campaign's website, www.onthebus.ms, features links to commercials encouraging Mississippians to get "on the bus." The campaign features two 30-second TV commercials, three 15-second TV commercials, two radio spots, a print ad, and outdoor boards.

the compulsory school attendance age, dropout and credit recovery programs will be developed in partnership with the Mississippi State Board for Community and Junior Colleges. This program will allow young adults the opportunity to either earn sufficient credits to graduate with a regular diploma, or to obtain a GED.

Component 5: Transition Plans for Dropout Prevention. Transition plans for students moving from third to fourth, fifth to sixth, and eighth to ninth grades were developed. Another group considered was recent re-enrollees from the juvenile justice system and students transitioning from grade 12 to the postsecondary workforce.

Component 6: Federal Program/Funding Opportunities. The MDE Office of Dropout Prevention searches for opportunities for federal funding.

Component 7: Research Partnerships. Another component of dropout prevention in Mississippi is locating research partnerships such as the partnership already established with State Farm and other organizations and corporations.

Taskforces & Teams Dropout Prevention Taskforce

Executing a comprehensive dropout prevention plan such as the one in Mississippi requires expertise lended from a pool of stakeholders. In the same vein, MDE staff, external agencies, business partners, community organizations, and the faith community all work to accomplish the goals of the state's

dropout prevention plan. MDE staff, particularly from the Office of Dropout Prevention, continue to provide guidance and technical assistance for local districts. They work to help schools accomplish each implementation goal.

Local Dropout Prevention Teams

All school districts in Mississippi have developed local dropout prevention teams. The local teams work in partnership with the state office's efforts. Mirroring the taskforce approach implemented on the state level, the local teams consist of district administration, school staff, local businesses and community partners, as well as other interested stakeholders.

The local teams identify students at risk for dropping out in their districts by gathering and analyzing data related to dropout rate in their schools. This information is used to initiate future decisions about dropout prevention. It is also used to create a local dropout prevention plan. Using this data or the state plan, local teams work together to accomplish the state's goal to increase the graduation rate to not less than 85% by the 2018-2019 school year. Meeting this goal includes calculating established graduation rate benchmarks for each two-year period starting with the 2008-2009 school year. To view some of the local dropout prevention plans or the statewide plan visit:

http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/Dropout_Prevention/plan.htm

..cont'd...On the Bus



Above: <http://onthebus.ms> features links to the campaigns TV commercials.

The spots were designed to inform Mississippians of the magnitude of the dropout problem in Mississippi.

Conceptually, they are designed to remind viewers where students can wind up if they step "off the bus" by dropping out of school. The commercials were all shot in the Mississippi Delta.

In addition to links to public relations materials, the *On the bus* website features information designed especially for student audiences, along with pages for businesses, community organizations, parents, and schools. Each page is tailored with information of use to each of these groups.

To learn more about *On The Bus* and to view campaign materials visit: <http://onthebus.ms>