Parents discuss dropout factors
Forum focused on causes of dropouts

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HUNTINGTON — Several parents openly shared their opinions Monday about how the school system and community can reshape the Cabell County education landscape and ultimately decrease the number of students who drop out.

Monday night's forum was hosted by United Way of the River Cities, which partnered with Cabell County Schools on a $300,000 grant from the West Virginia Department of Education and the Education Alliance to produce a dropout prevention plan.

The initiative, known as Education Matters, is a community coalition focused on identifying the issues, the solutions and the stakeholders.

"This is not a school system issue," said Laura Gilliam, executive director of United Way. "The school system has a part, but so do the rest of us. When a student drops out, it affects everybody." The main culprits that lead to a student dropping out are attendance, behavior and course completion. But Monday's forum, like the 12 others that have been held with high school students, teachers and administrators in various communities in Cabell County, was focused on identifying the issues within those three headings.

What was found among the group was that home life affects all three. Lack of stability, lack of a positive role model and poverty conditions in the home were identified as the top culprits.

The group collectively agreed that there needs to be more outreach into the homes with more of a focus on individualized education plans. They also agreed that many behavioral problems can be identified or addressed through better infrastructure. That means finding ways for counselors to be in the elementary schools more than one or two days a week, providing in-depth training to teachers working with students who show signs of behavioral problems and also providing additional resources for students. To help students succeed academically, the group talked about a perceived lack of relevance in course materials and the weight on teachers' shoulders to teach to the test. They also said the resources available within the Tri-State to make education more relevant and fun are under-utilized. There also was discussion about local businesses " adopting" schools with limited financial resources.

If students do fall through the cracks and drop out, the question is how to re-engage them, no matter how old they are. One person, who owns a downtown business, suggested tax credits for businesses that employ dropouts who are working toward their diploma or GED. There also was a suggestion about incentives for those folks to try to finish their diploma or GED, with the possibility of a community scholarship.

There also was some in depth discussion about identifying and diagnosing students with mental or learning disabilities, such as dyslexia or attention deficit disorder, and providing additional resources to make sure they stay on par with their peers.

Brittany Bell, a mother of a 7-year-old at Southside Elementary, said it was important for her to attend because she knows not every child has parents as involved as she is.

Just because it's not my child doesn't mean there aren't children suffering, " Bell said. " I want her to stay on task and be a leader. I fear for her. Her education is so important." The final forum is scheduled for 4:30 p.m. Wednesday, May 14, and is for Cabell County teachers. Those who plan to attend are

asked to contact Sara Blevins, coordinator of the Education Matters program, at
sara.blevins@unitedwayrivercities.org or 304-523-8929, ext. 4.

A Dropout Prevention Summit is planned for 1 p.m. Wednesday, May 23, at St. Mary's Center for Education in the 2800 block of 5th Avenue. It is open to the public and will include data from all the forums conducted in the past six months. The purpose of the summit is to explore the reasons Cabell County students drop out and to develop a strategy for implementing solutions to current problems.