

Summit aimed at preventing dropouts

Coalition of teachers, parents, community members focused on improving behavior, course completion, attendance

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HUNTINGTON — Dozens of teachers, administrators, parents and community members attended a dropout prevention summit Wednesday, where they dissected several key issues that came to the forefront during forums in the past five months.

The summit was organized by a coalition known as Education Matters, a partnership between Cabell County Schools and United Way of the River Cities. It is charged with bringing people together from inside and outside education to help improve children's chances of graduating from high school.

Sara Blevins, the coordinator of Education Matters, told the group that a student who drops out of high school has a universal impact. That's why it will take the entire community to improve the statistics that show a quarter of high school freshmen won't graduate with their peers.

"It is a universal problem, it affects everybody," Blevins said. "All of you are involved in dropout prevention." The coalition is focused on improving attendance, behavior and course completion, the three main factors that can help in determining if a student is at risk to drop out. Out of the forums held in the school system and in the community came 11 topics that Wednesday's participants spent about 45 minutes discussing. They talked about the overarching goal, action steps and obstacles to overcome.

The topics included a modified school day, personnel, dropout prevention and re-integration, counseling and social services, parent education and involvement, general input for student support, policy changes, mentoring, individual concepts and GED and technical education programs.

Some common themes arose, including the need for counseling and family support services at each school on a more consistent basis, improving communication between parents and the community, helping high school students personalize their curriculum and overcoming transportation hurdles.

Laura Gilliam, executive director of United Way of the River Cities, said some of the issues must be solved by the school system, while others need the input of local residents, business owners and the faith community.

One group that must be part of the solution is teachers, said Bob Angel, an elementary education professor at Marshall University.

They need to know what role they can play, said Angel, whose teaching focus is in preschool. Schools are so much more responsible for the wellbeing of a child than ever before." Lauren Wyant, the school-based supervisor for Pretera Center, said it also became apparent that more family and student counseling services are needed in schools. She said a needs assessment should be conducted to identify which schools are lacking services and possible funding sources.

Elizabeth McQuaide-Parlock, a kindergarten aide at Southside Elementary this year, said funding should be reallocated to help parents raise their children, specifically during the first five years of the child's life.

If (parents) knew they had support, I think they do better, she said.

Each of the specific groups will reconvene in separate meetings on Monday and Tuesday, June 4-5, to have a more focused discussion on how to take the action steps that were identified Wednesday.

For more information about Education Matters or for a complete schedule of the upcoming meetings, contact Blevins at 304-523-8929, ext. 4, or sara.blevins@unitedwayrivercities.org.