



School Dropout Study Group Report Executive Summary

SCOPE (Sarasota County Openly Plans for Excellence) is a volunteer-driven, nonprofit organization dedicated to engaging community members in approaches to improving the quality of life in Sarasota County. Through its annual study of two important community issues and publishing an annual *Community Report Card* our community celebrates its successes and tackles its problems.

School Dropout was one of two topics studied in 2002-2003. The School Dropout Study Group convened in September 2002 and was comprised of any community member who wished to participate. More than seventy individuals were involved throughout the seven months of weekly meetings; a core group of 47 individuals saw this rigorous process through to the end. The study group considered what the community can do to increase the proportion of Sarasota County youth who complete their high school education. The report focuses on the public school system and examines school dropout at the district level. Their charge was to explore the extent to which Sarasota County youth are not completing high school, who drops out and why, current efforts to prevent students from dropping out and approaches for reducing the number of dropouts.

Twelve meetings were dedicated to hearing presentations from key resource people in our community on various aspects of school dropout. Speakers included representatives from the School Board of Sarasota County, nonprofit organizations serving at-risk youth, teachers and guidance counselors, students and dropouts, mental health, social services and law enforcement representatives. The study group devoted nine additional meetings to reach consensus on their findings, develop conclusions about major problems and commendable efforts in the community, and create recommendations for change.

Implementation of the Recommendations

The next step in the SCOPE process is to use the volunteer, citizen influence of SCOPE to seek implementation of the recommendations contained in the study report. This process includes the tasks of education, advocacy and monitoring. Education is aimed at increasing public awareness about the issue and educating key decision makers and officials about the study. The advocacy efforts are recommendation specific and will help build public support or target key decision-makers regarding their capacity to implement a recommendation.

Over the next few months, a volunteer Implementation Task Force will develop an implementation plan, and some measurable objectives to assess progress. This task force will spend up to two years advancing the recommendations to appropriate decision-makers and organizations within the community. The task force will assess its progress at periodic intervals and report on the results of its efforts to the SCOPE Board and to the public.

The following summarizes some of the key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the SCOPE School Dropout Study Group.

KEY FINDINGS

- Between 1997-2001, 1,672 students dropped out of Sarasota County public high schools, which represents a four-year dropout rate of 14.5 %.
- The 2000 U.S. Census estimates that in Sarasota County, 33,164 individuals over the age of 25 do not hold a high school diploma or its equivalent.
- While minority and low socio-economic students are over-represented in the dropout population, the majority of 2000-01 Sarasota County Public school dropouts were white and were not from low-income families.
- Florida Dropouts who never complete high school earn an estimated \$24,000 less a year than their counterparts who graduated on time.
- On a statewide basis, increasing the status of dropouts to high school graduate or its equivalent would increase annual federal income tax revenues by \$2.3 billion and annual state sales tax revenue by 769 million.
- According to the 2000 U.S. Census, in Sarasota County, 71% of children ages six to 17 have both parents in the labor force and the custodial parent in 85% of single parent households works.
- A national study shows that children with mentors are 75% less likely to drop out of school.
- During 2000-01, approximately 22% Sarasota 9th and 10th graders failed to be promoted to the next grade. Research shows students who have been retained are more likely to drop out.
- In Sarasota County, nearly one in six children starts kindergarten without the basic skills they need to succeed and most are from low-income families.
- The majority of 2000-01 dropouts scored below an acceptable level of achievement (level 2 or lower) on the 10th grade FCAT in either math (73%) or reading (80%)
- Of 2002 Sarasota County graduates, 53% reported that they planned to attend college – 47% did not. After one year, 14 %of 2001 graduates who planned to continue their education did not.

HIGHLIGHTS

Major Problems

- Parental involvement in children's education is important at all levels of education, yet there are few successful programs to engage parents beyond elementary school.
- At-risk students often lack a caring, supportive role model to encourage them to achieve academic, personal, and career goals.
- There are children who enter school unprepared to learn, and not all preschool, or childcare providers prepare children for school.
- Current programs and resources for at-risk youth are not fully utilized, in part due to a lack of coordination and collaboration within the district and between community organizations and schools.
- Many public school students are not on grade-level in basic academic skills beginning in early grades and persisting through high school.
- The ability for students to relate what they learn to their work and educational goals impacts their decision to complete high school, yet the current curriculum provides few options for students who do not plan to attend college.

Recommended Solutions

- Develop community-wide strategies that maximize current efforts for:
 - Engaging parents, especially those not typically involved, in all levels of their children's education
 - Engaging the community in mentoring and tutoring programs for at risk youth.
 - Ensuring high quality, accessible, affordable pre-school and child care programs.
- Appoint an administrator to facilitate a district wide plan to reduce school dropout and improve coordination among schools and community organizations.
- Enhance the Academic Improvement Plan (AIP) process so that each student who is performing below grade level receives comprehensive interventions and is assigned an advocate who will ensure the plan is executed.
- Vocational technical programs should be easily accessible by all high school students and middle and high schools should expand the use of career and vocational exploration, individualized instruction and applied learning concepts.
- Each district high school should provide alternative education modeled after successful programs.

Download a complete copy of the Dropout Report from www.scopexcel.org

OR

Request that a copy be mailed to you by calling SCOPE at 941-365-8751

THE STORIES PROJECT

In its second year of community studies, SCOPE faced the challenge of bringing a human face to the issues it studied. In the SCOPE Study Group process, volunteers spend six months fact finding and interviewing experts, reaching consensus on what the major problems are, and developing recommendations for change. In the past, SCOPE has relied on experts and data for the facts. For its 2002-03 Community Studies, SCOPE added a new dimension to its fact finding and public awareness tools—The Stories Project.

The Stories Project is a series of personal stories collected in two documentaries—one on mental health and the other on school dropout—that help humanize the issues. Participants play an invaluable role in the study process by sharing their experiences and helping gathering other people's stories during the filmmaking process. By adding personal experiences to the Study Group process, The Stories Project helps to further educate the public on the importance of these community concerns.

If you would like to view these documentaries and discuss the issue with Study group members, please call the SCOPE Speakers Bureau at 941/365-8751.



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