

# More local students decide to stay in school

## Franklin County Schools drop-out rate declines 50 percent in five years

Despite more rigorous courses and more academically demanding class offerings, Franklin County Schools posted a significant decrease in high school dropouts, according to reports released by the state last week. In local high schools, 110 students dropped out last year, for a rate of 4.5 percent. The previous year, 145 students dropped out, a rate of 6.1 percent.

"We are thrilled to see the tremendous improvement in this year's numbers," said FCS superintendent Dr. Bert L'Homme, "especially in light of our increased focus on higher academic standards. But we won't be happy until we can either keep all kids in school or get them in a program where their educational needs can be met."

L'Homme isn't surprised at the improved numbers. A little over two years ago, when he first came to Franklin County, one of the first things he did was to start a dropout prevention taskforce. Only two years before that, Franklin County posted an abysmal 8.85 percent high school dropout rate (for the school year 1999-00).

So why has the dropout rate declined by almost 50 percent in only five years? There is no single magic bullet, said Marla Peoples, Director of Student Services. "Students drop out for various reasons, and it takes an array of efforts to keep them in school," she said.

"One thing we have focused on is to help students feel connected to school. They have to believe there is something there for them." All three high schools now have dropout prevention counselors, Peoples said, who are able to make one-on-one connections with at-risk students. They are a physical presence in the schools where they have been able to intervene and advocate for students who otherwise might drop out.

In addition, course recovery is now available for students who might have dropped out for academic reasons. Course recovery is an on-line opportunity for a student to make up a failed class, and is available for at both the Creative Education Centre and now at all three high schools.

Barbara Howle, dropout prevention counselor at Franklinton, works hard to motivate her students to stay in school. "It takes an effort to build relationships with these students," she said, "so that they know you and trust you. They believe someone at the school really cares, and that's important."

She also has a mentor program at her school that she thinks will be a significant deterrent to dropping out.

"We have volunteers from Sprint who come in once a week and work with our kids," she said. "I believe it is making a big difference for these students."

Deborah Edwards at Bunn High Schools said that students who have been suspended are at higher risk of dropping out. She makes sure that suspended students have their assignments and are keeping up with their missed classwork and homework. That is one more tether that keeps them connected to school – one more reason not to drop out.

At Louisburg High School, dropout prevention counselor Tawanda Smith monitors attendance very closely. She knows that students who are not in school – for whatever reason – are falling behind academically, a prime reason many kids drop out. Smith has implemented an incentive program to help improve overall attendance. A raffle was held last six weeks among all students who had perfect attendance. Several students won \$10 gift cards and one lucky student won a mountain bike. This six-week, a cool \$100 is on the line for a student with perfect attendance.

Smith has also peppered her campus with subtle "stay-in-school" messages, poster and brochures. She works closely with her students, trying to spot potential problems before they become big problems and trying to help her students understand the real value of staying in school.

"Of course, dropout prevention is not just about the dropout counselor," she says, "it's about the whole school. Students don't stay or go because of me. It's about the whole experience, their peers, their teachers, their classes, everything. Keeping kids in school is a team effort."

Decreasing dropouts is not a new undertaking for public schools. The state has collected data on dropouts for decades but reporting methods and definitions of what a dropout is have changed. Since 1999, the state has defined a dropout as a student who was enrolled at sometime during a school year (which is the reporting year) who had not enrolled by day 20 of the next year unless that student had graduated or transferred to another public school district or private or home school.

Students who leave public school and complete their education at a community college are still considered dropouts under the state definition. Nearly 10 percent of North Carolina's high school dropouts fall in this category.

Statewide, dropouts have increased slightly in the past two years. Over time, however, the statewide dropout rate has declined from 6.43 percent in 1999-2000 to 4.74 percent last year. This is the first year since this data has been collected that Franklin County's dropout rate is below the statewide rate.

