



Muskegon Chronicle

Community rallies to curb dropout rates

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By Lynn Moore

lmoore@muskegonchronicle.com

For the 200 people sitting in a church sanctuary Thursday morning, the problem of students dropping out wasn't a school issue -- it was a community one.

Their discussions about dropouts didn't focus on what educators are doing right or wrong, but how individuals and organizations in the community can help. And if the turnout at the Creating a Graduation Generation! conference at First Baptist Church in Muskegon Township was any indication, there's no lack of those willing to pitch in.

People from churches, social agencies, law enforcement, government and schools flocked to the free conference that turned into a brainstorming session on how to heal the epidemic of school dropouts.

They had filled every seat in the house by 8 a.m. to listen to a national speaker tell his own story of overcoming family dysfunction and severe learning disabilities to earn his master's degree in social work. For Christian Moore, founder and CEO of WhyTry Inc., salvation came from "Mama Jackson," the stern mother of a friend who took a young Moore under her wing and showed him hope.

Hope. The word kept surfacing Thursday. Hope, it was said, is what students need -- hope for their own future, hope that there are people who care, hope that they can succeed no matter their challenges.

And it has to come one student at a time, one relationship at a time, said Moore, who has developed a multi-media program for at-risk students that uses modern rock and hiphop music and visuals to motivate students.

"We've got to get out of the box and put our intentions in a language the next generation understands," Moore said. "We have got to give these kids hope."

The seed for the conference came from the Rev. John Brown, pastor emeritus of First Baptist, and staff at Muskegon Public Schools who connected after learning they both were seeking solutions to the dropout problem.

Muskegon officials have been grappling with a sagging graduation rate, that one estimate pegged at 46 percent. Nationally, the 50 biggest cities have dropout rates of 50 percent, Moore said.

Many believe graduation rates in Michigan -- which have ranged from 83 percent to 100 percent in Muskegon County -- have been artificially high because they have computed only the number of high school seniors who end up graduating. A new formula for computing graduation rates that reflects how many students start as freshman and how many graduate four years later is expected to lower previously-stated graduation rates by at least 10 percent -- and call more attention to the dropout problem.

Brown said he was impressed by "such goodwill, such cooperation" shown by those who attended the morning-long conference.

"I think a lot can be done because you see the enthusiasm and commitment," Brown said, calling the response to the conference "all anybody could have possibly hoped for."

He expects the Muskegon Area Children's Agenda will convene a work group to follow up on ideas that conference attendees came up with during small breakout sessions organized for those in the faith, human services, business and education communities.

One suggestion was to provide free summer school.

It was the cost of summer school -- more than \$200 -- that prevented Shawnee Tate's daughter from attending to make up several credits she needs to graduate. Tate, a Muskegon Township mom who attended the conference, said her daughter recently learned she has to repeat her senior year -- a prospect that could drive many students to give up and drop out.

"She's so far behind, she has to take her senior year all over again -- she was devastated," Tate said.

Cooperation and sustainability are needed to get such good ideas implemented and working -- no easy feat, said Muskegon Public Schools Superintendent Colin Armstrong. For example, he said, every school has a highly successful teacher who everyone in the building knows about. And yet it's difficult to get others to model that teacher's practices, Armstrong said.

"Everyone here has at least one idea on how to improve the graduation rate," Armstrong said. "And yet, we have difficulty getting it in place, keeping it in place and getting everybody to buy in."

Armstrong established a minority youth advocate position to focus on 60 African American male students in his district at risk of dropping out. The position, held by Don Jones, has proven successful primarily because he provides one-on-one advocacy.

"We recognize these kids don't function in a vacuum," Jones said. "They have to deal with a multiplicity of problems, not only in the home, but in the neighborhoods they live at."

Jones said he has forged his own relationships with social agencies to get his job done -- an approach that was advocated again and again at Thursday's conference.

"No one entity is going to defeat this dropout problem," Jones said. "It's got to be a collaborative program."

The coordinated approach already is in place through Family Resource Centers developed by the Department of Human Services and in place at 10 schools throughout the county. There families can seek help for a myriad of problems, and educators can help students with such "baggage" as domestic violence, substance abuse and poverty that they bring from home to school, said Bruce Wright, social services program manager for the Muskegon County DHS.

Such willingness to work together impressed Moore, who said he was going to spread the word about Muskegon's community effort to address the dropout rate at his next speech in Manhattan.

"What you have in this room is very rare," he told those assembled.

In a motivating speech at the end of the conference, the conference's master of ceremonies Muskegon County Probate/Family Court Judge Gregory C. Pittman called on the community to set high standards for its students and to reach out to young people who need to be lifted up.

"That's what these students need -- they need that relationship, they need that hope and they need that expectation," Pittman said.

"We have the opportunity in this community to be whatever it is we want to be. There's no one coming in to save us."

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