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****** Media Release ******



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Contact:

Kathryn Christ, Media Consultant, (904) 451-7604
Connie Hodges, President and CEO, (904) 390-3218
Elizabeth Ash, Communications Manager, (904) 390-3226

Dropout Pilot Results in Significant Achievements
Michael Ward, CEO of CSX Transportation, invests in five-year expansion

Jacksonville, Fla. – Today at Matthew Gilbert Middle School, United Way of Northeast Florida leaders and Superintendent Ed Pratt-Dannals announced the first-year results of the community impact strategy focused on dropout prevention—*Achievers For Life*. Statistically significant improvements were demonstrated in areas shown to predict early withdrawal from high school.

“I am extremely pleased to share that United Way and our partners have developed an innovative strategy to address the high school dropout epidemic in our community,” said Chris Hazelip, attorney with Rogers Towers, P.A. and chair of United Way’s Achievers For Life Partnership Council. “Through *Achievers For Life*, nearly 150 sixth grade students and their families have reversed middle school challenges and increased their engagement in school as demonstrated in significant gains in GPAs and promotion rates. These families and our community will reap the benefits for many years to come.” In addition to improved GPAs and higher promotion rates, first year achievements included fewer suspensions and lower course failure rates.

These accomplishments are critical because they address the most powerful predictors for dropout risk, which include 80% or less school attendance, failure of sixth grade math or English, out-of-school suspension, and poor final behavior grade, as identified by Dr. Robert Balfanz, a researcher with Johns Hopkins University.

In 2007, more than 2,100 Duval County public school students dropped out of school. This rate is twice the average for the state of Florida. The costs of dropping out ripple through the community in the form of increased crime and incarceration rates, greater dependence on public assistance and public healthcare, and lost tax revenue to support necessary education and public programs.

The *Achievers For Life* pilot was launched in the Arlington area in response to the exceptional need and the opportunity to leverage existing community resources. In 2007, the graduation rate of Terry Parker High School was 54%, resulting in one of the highest dropout rates in Northeast Florida.

By keeping students in school until high school graduation, the community is well-positioned to reverse these negative trends. In fact, an economic study conducted by L. Lochner and E. Moretti and published in *The American Economic Review* indicated that increased graduation rates translate into safer neighborhoods and communities, estimating that murder and aggravated assault rates fall 20% per 10% increase in graduation rates.

“We are excited with the success we’re seeing with *Achievers For Life*,” said Ed Pratt-Dannals, superintendent of Duval County Public Schools. “We have engaged students and families and provided community support to reach those students most at-risk for dropping out. Simultaneously, we are addressing one of the strategic plan objectives for Duval County Public Schools, which is to increase the high school graduation rate. I thank United Way for undertaking this effort and helping to lead our students to the future success of graduation.”

The *Achievers For Life* strategy addresses all five dropout predictors through family advocates, mentors and parent engagement activities. Parental support for this voluntary program is high as indicated by the 92% of parents of AFL students who stated that the program helped their family deal better with issues, as well as, the 97% of parents who asserted that they would recommend *Achievers For Life* to family or friends. Student participants became more engaged in school and made better decisions resulting in improved promotion rates, fewer suspensions and better grades, successfully navigating the critical sixth grade transition year.

In support of *Achievers For Life*, Michael Ward, CEO of CSX Transportation, Inc., has pledged a \$1,000,000 gift to United Way of Northeast Florida over the next five years. “Through *Achievers For Life*, we have demonstrated that our community makes a positive difference in the lives of our children when we work together—parents, schools and community,” Ward explained. “I am extremely impressed with the outstanding accomplishments of the students and their families in one year, and I am committed to its expansion to benefit even more students.”

Building on the success of its pilot, United Way has expanded the program to serve middle school students and their families in the Springfield area. These students are slated to attend Andrew Jackson High School, which has a graduation rate of 57%. Two of every five ninth graders attending this high school are at risk of not graduating. During the 2008-2009 school year, nearly 450 students and their families are expected to be served through the *Achievers For Life* initiative, including 147

current AFL students, 150 incoming sixth graders at Ft. Caroline and Arlington Middle Schools and 150 incoming sixth graders at Matthew Gilbert and Northwestern Middle Schools in Springfield.

“Michael Ward has made a wonderful gift to our community,” said Connie Hodges, president and CEO of United Way of Northeast Florida. “His support will enable hundreds of families and students to better connect to school and get back on track to graduation, resulting in a stronger community for all of us.

United Way’s community partners in implementing *Achievers For Life* include Communities in Schools of Jacksonville, Jewish Family and Community Services, Full Service Schools of Jacksonville and Duval County Public Schools.

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***Achievers for Life* is a community initiative focused on dropout prevention, which targets 6th grade students who are at risk for academic failure. Components include quality mentoring and counseling for students, family support services, as well as, parent training to help principals increase families’ engagement at school. *Achievers for Life* addresses middle school challenges in order to keep students on track for high school graduation.**

United Way of Northeast Florida works to create real, long-lasting change in Northeast Florida by focusing on the building blocks for a good life. In partnership with volunteers, community organizations, and leaders, United Way is creating opportunities to improve life for people in Baker, Clay, Duval, Nassau and northern St. Johns counties. In addition, United Way leads United Way 2-1-1, a 24/7 information referral hotline; Life: Act 2, a pro-active response to an exploding senior population; and Full Service Schools, a community approach to removing barriers to academic success. For more information, call 904-390-3200 or visit www.uwnefl.org.

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