

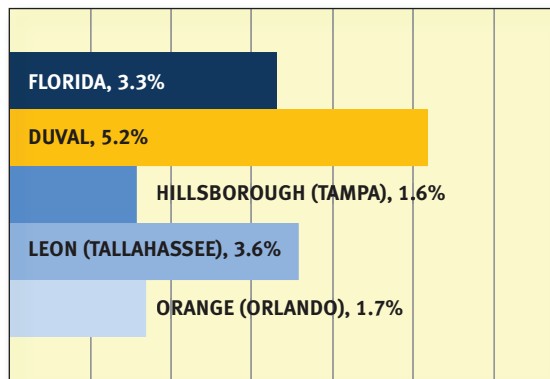
Achievers For Life: Addressing the Dropout Crisis

A ONE-YEAR PROGRESS REPORT

October 2008

Silent no more, the national high school dropout epidemic has been center stage in numerous studies and reports in recent years. A chorus of experts in academia, education and labor has called community leaders across the country to action. Communities must join school leadership to ensure positive outcomes for all our youth.

DROPOUT RATES, 2006-2007



Percentage of Students Who Withdrew From School

Source: Florida School Indicators Report, <http://data.fldoe.org/fsir/>.

Leading the charge in our community, United Way of Northeast Florida formed a Partnership of local education experts, corporate partners and community stakeholders from across the region in March 2006 to develop a targeted, measurable strategy based on solid research. The Achievers For Life Initiative (AFL) evolved from eleven months of national, state, and local research and launched in Arlington in Fall 2007.

First Year Results

Achievers For Life served 147 sixth grade students and their families at Arlington and Ft. Caroline Middle Schools during the pilot year 2007-08. Statistically significant improvements were demonstrated in areas shown to predict early withdrawal from high school.

First Year Achievements:

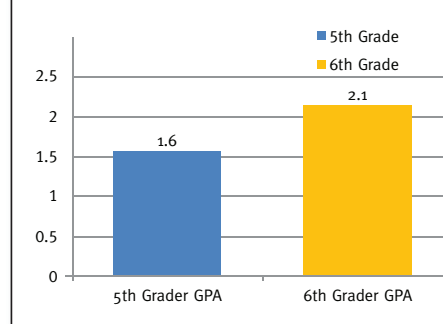
- Improved GPAs
- Higher promotion rates
- Fewer suspensions
- Lower course failure rates

For evaluation purposes, the records of 50 students who participated in AFL during the entire school year were examined against two datasets—a) their prior year performance, and b) a group of 50 sixth graders who presented the same attendance and behavior early warning signs as AFL students.

Improved GPA:

In a reversal of the middle school transition challenges, AFL students' overall Grade Point Average (GPA) increased during their 6th grade year. The average GPA of the 50 AFL students served the full year rose from 1.6 at the end of the 2006-07 school year to 2.1 at the end of the 2007-08 school year; this is a 31% GPA year-on-year increase.

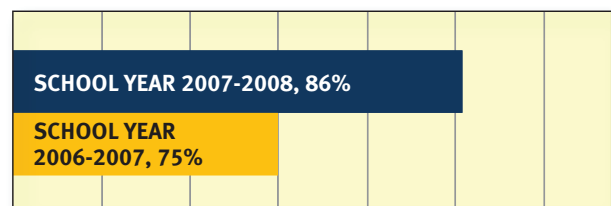
**AFL STUDENTS ACHIEVE
31% YEAR-ON-YEAR GPA INCREASE**



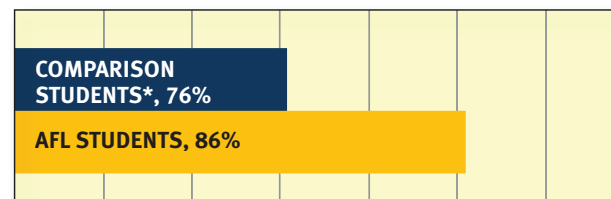
Higher Promotion Rates:

Promotion rates rose 11% for AFL students from their 2006-07 school year. AFL students were also promoted to the 7th grade at a rate 10 percentage points higher than the comparison group (86% compared to 76% of the comparison group).

PROMOTION RATES FOR ALL AFL STUDENTS



**PROMOTION RATES VS. COMPARISON GROUP
SCHOOL YEAR 2007-2008**

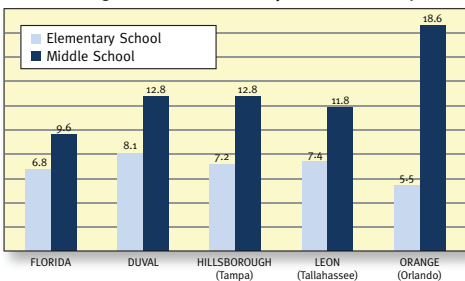


Why Is the Sixth-Grade Transition Critical?

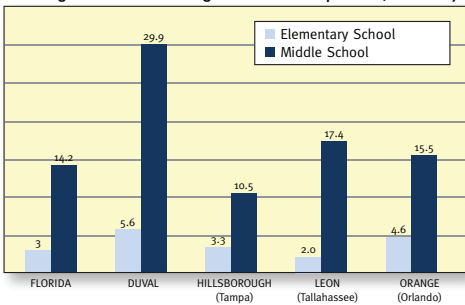
Sixth grade means a new school for students – a new locker, a new principal, new classmates and a schedule of classes to follow. Promotion to seventh grade requires a minimum 1.5 grade-point average (GPA). Many children begin to fall behind and middle school retention is a key risk factor for later dropping out.¹

Powerful indicators for early withdrawal emerge as students move from elementary into middle school including heightened levels of truancy and behavior problems that lead to out-of-school suspension. The graphs below illustrate dramatic gaps between Florida elementary and middle school students.

TRUANCY AND SUSPENSIONS JUMP IN MIDDLE SCHOOL
Percentage of Students Absent 21 Days or More, 2006-2007



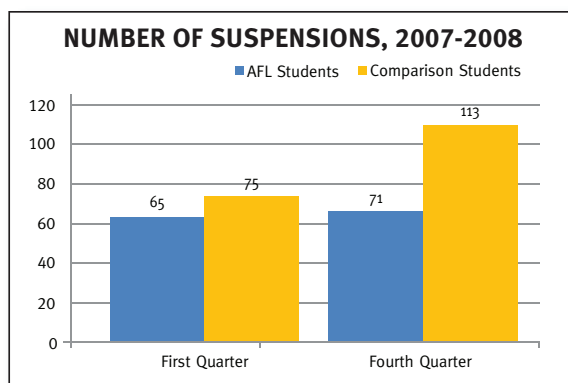
Percentage of Students Receiving Out-of-School Suspensions, 2006-2007



Source: Florida School Indicators Report, <http://data.fldoe.org/fsir/>.

Fewer Suspensions:

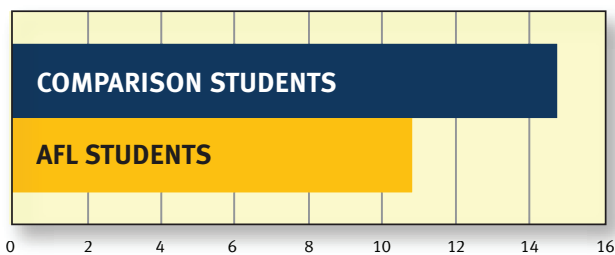
While students in both the AFL group and comparison group averaged nearly the same number of suspensions at the beginning of the year, AFL students received a statistically significant lower number of suspensions at the end of the school year (37% fewer suspensions than their peers).



Lower Course Failure Rates:

Further, AFL students earned 36% fewer course failures in math and language arts than the comparison group.

NUMBER OF COURSE FAILURES IN MATH AND/OR LANGUAGE ARTS, 2007-2008



Parent Response:

The participation rate of parents clearly demonstrates that parental interest is high, and that parents are open to available resources (97% of parents to whom AFL was offered agreed to participate).

Parents of AFL students overwhelmingly responded positively to an end of year survey:

- 92% stated that the program helped their family deal better with issues
- 97% asserted that they would recommend AFL to family or friends

In summary, the data demonstrates that the majority of AFL Students successfully navigated the transitional sixth grade year. AFL students

became more engaged in school and made better decisions that resulted in improved promotion rates, fewer suspensions and better grades.

The Achievers For Life Strategy

What sets AFL apart from other dropout prevention initiatives is a focus on **early prevention**. AFL targets sixth graders exhibiting proven predictors of school disengagement:

- 21 or more unexcused absences
- Low GPA or failure in math or language arts
- Three or more Level Two (or higher) discipline referrals
- Principal recommendation

Program participation is voluntary. Student and family participants receive individualized, intensive support through Family and Achievement Advocates.

Family Advocates meet with participant families regularly, helping them to progress toward family social goals and connecting them with social services as appropriate. Family Advocates provided over 500 referrals to more than 20 separate community resources. Additionally, participants have access to free mental health services offered through Full Service Schools.

Achievement Advocates act as mentors. Meeting with the student one hour each week, these paid and volunteer advocates encourage students to reach mutually established goals, while closely monitoring attendance, classroom behavior and grades.

In addition to individualized support services, AFL funds **Parent Engagement Activities**. AFL principals receive financial resources to implement research-based, measurable, school-wide strategies to keep students and their families engaged in learning.

United Way partners with Jewish Family and Community Services and Communities in Schools of Jacksonville for the provision of individualized support services through Family Advocates and Achievement Advocates respectively.

What We Know For Sure

An unacceptable number of students are dropping out of Northeast Florida's public schools. Progress is being made. The graduation rate increased 6.3% in 2007; however, Duval County continues to lag behind state levels. One of every three students fails to graduate on time. In 2007, 1,750 DCPS students dropped out at a rate nearly twice that of the state. The cost of dropping out of high school is high – for the student, for families and for our community. The negative consequences of dropping out of high school extend far beyond that of the individual, impacting the economic wellbeing and safety of neighborhoods and communities.

Economic Impact

Ill-equipped to enter today's high-tech, globally competitive workforce, high school dropouts earn approximately \$9,634 less per year than high school graduates.² On average, households headed by a high school graduate accrue **ten times** more wealth than households headed by a high school dropout. Families headed by a graduate thus have better odds of weathering an unexpected financial crisis, such as a lay off or a medical emergency.³

Today's high school dropouts must compete not only with high school graduates in their community, but also with workers around the globe. New trade agreements combined with high international wage differentials make America's low-skilled workers less competitive than prior generations, resulting in downward pressure on low-skilled worker wages and an increased likelihood of unemployment.

Dropouts strain public resources through greater dependence on welfare, reduced tax revenue, and increased healthcare costs but the economic costs do not end there. Globalization and new technologies have forever altered the economic landscape. Our region's ability to attract business investment in today's global, high-tech, interconnected environment is highly dependent upon our talent pool. Highly skilled workers attract high-wage industries and new business investment; low-skilled workers do not.

Dropouts during the 2007 school year alone represent a \$1.2 billion-dollar loss to Northeast Florida's economy over the course of their lifetime.⁴ This estimate is for only one class of dropouts and does not take into account the multiplier effect of each dollar added to the economy.

The cost of dropping out of high school is high... for the student, for families and for our community.

Crime

Increased graduation rates translate into safer neighborhoods and communities. Economists estimate that murder and aggravated assault rates fall 20% per 10% increase in graduation rates.⁵ Dropouts are more than three times as likely to be arrested and eight times as likely to be in prison than high school graduates.⁶ Staying in school, even one year longer, reduces the likelihood a youth will turn to crime.⁷

Nationally, 75% of state prison inmates did not complete high school.⁸ Locally, the Florida Times-Union found that more than 60% of Jacksonville's accused murderers did not finish high school and one out of seven failed to reach 9th grade.⁹ According to economists, each additional male graduate provides a social benefit to the community of \$1,170-\$2,100 annually in terms of

reduced crime costs.¹⁰ Clearly, improved graduation rates are crucial to the future vitality of the region.

**INCREASED GRADUATION RATES
PREVENT VIOLENT CRIME**
Annual Impact of 10% High School
Graduation Rate Increase

	<i>Homicides Prevented*</i>	<i>Aggravated Assault Prevented*</i>
<i>Baker</i>	1	14
<i>Clay</i>	1	135
<i>Duval</i>	25	927
<i>Flagler</i>	1	36
<i>Nassau</i>	0	192
<i>Northeast Florida</i>	28	1,304

* Number of homicides or aggravated assaults that would be prevented based on a 20% reduction of 2007 figures from Florida Department of Law Enforcement.

The Long Road of Withdrawal

In the context of staggering repercussions for high school non-completion, why are so many of our youth dropping out? A recent survey of students who dropped out found that most did not withdraw for lack of academic capacity. Instead respondents pointed to boredom, lack of motivation, and real life events - barriers that can be overcome through interventions.¹¹ Researchers have also found that dropping out is the end point of a long process. Five powerful predictors for later withdrawal can be seen as early as the sixth grade:

- 80% or less school attendance;
- Failure of sixth grade math;
- Failure of sixth grade English;
- Out-of-school suspension; and
- Poor final behavior grade.

Students exhibiting one or more of these risk factors were shown to have only a 10% chance of graduating on time and only a 20% chance of graduating in five years.¹²

Middle school students in Duval County are already raising the warning flags for future withdrawal with higher rates of absenteeism and out-of school suspension than their peers in comparable Florida school districts. The good news for educators and communities is that most dropouts have the intellectual capacity to graduate and by understanding the early warning signs we can better direct resources to ensure their success.

Achiever on Course From AFL Files

Moses entered the sixth grade at Ft. Caroline Middle for the second time in Fall 2007. Excessively absent the prior year, he was unable to maintain his grades. Moses enrolled in the AFL program and has accomplished a marked improvement in grades, attendance and behavior. Consistently receiving As and Bs, Moses was on the A/B Honor Roll by his second quarter report card. Tardies and disciplinary referrals are things of the past. His teachers report that he is a pleasure to have in the classroom. Moses' true success came in the form of an accelerated promotion. In Fall 2008, he joined his peers in the 8th grade.

Duval County Schools Face the Challenge

No action by the community could be successful without strong coordination and partnership with the school system. Leadership at Duval County Public Schools (DCPS) has taken decisive action with the goal of increasing the graduation rate from the 2007 level of 64% to 77% by 2012. DCPS's five year strategic plan identifies 16 strategies geared at accomplishing that goal. Strategies include providing additional support for low performing students; improving student attendance; recruiting the best teachers and principals and retaining them; increasing and strengthening parent/family school partnerships; enhancing alliances with community, business and civic leaders to recruit 20,000 mentors by 2020; and increasing effective academic interventions and safety net programs to improve promotion rates at all levels. United Way applauds the school district's efforts. With community initiatives such as Achievers For Life, Full Service Schools and Learning To Finish, the district's ambitious goal is firmly within reach.

Achievers For Life Communities

Based on the severity and complexity of the problem in Duval County, the Partnership determined to launch a comprehensive pilot in one Jacksonville neighborhood, Arlington, as a first step.

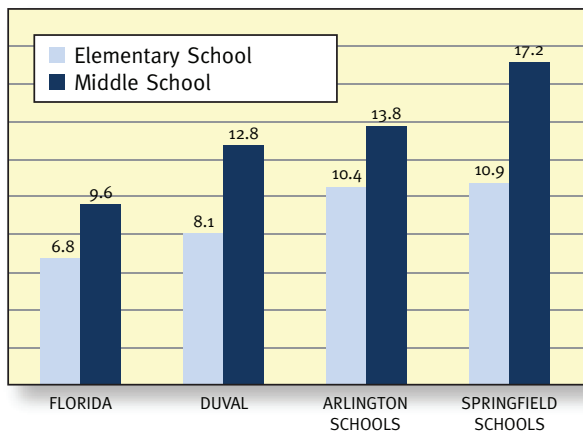
Year 2 Expansion

Building on Year 1 success, United Way will continue the pilot in Arlington, and also expand efforts into the Springfield area. These communities were chosen for several factors, including exceptional need and the opportunity to leverage

existing community resources. In 2007 the graduation rates of Terry Parker and Andrew Jackson High Schools were 54% and 57% respectively. In other words, two of every five ninth graders attending these community high schools are at risk of not graduating.

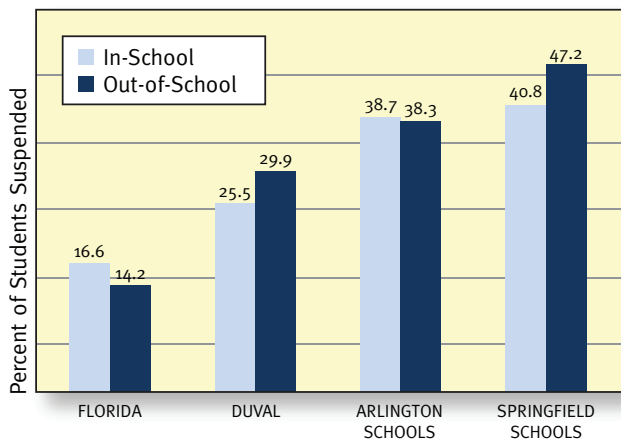
Students in the AFL target middle schools are exhibiting the early warning signs for withdrawal at even higher levels than their Duval county peers as illustrated in the graphs.

Percentage of Students Absent 21 Days, 2006-2007



Source: Florida School Indicators Report, <http://data.fldoe.org/fsir/>

Middle-School Suspensions, 2006-2007



Source: Florida School Indicators Report, <http://data.fldoe.org/fsir/>

During the 2008-2009 school year, United Way expects to serve nearly 450 students through the Achievers For Life initiative, including: 147 2007-08 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.

With community support, Achievers For Life will expand to additional middle schools with high levels of students demonstrating the warning signs of disengagement and dropping out.

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