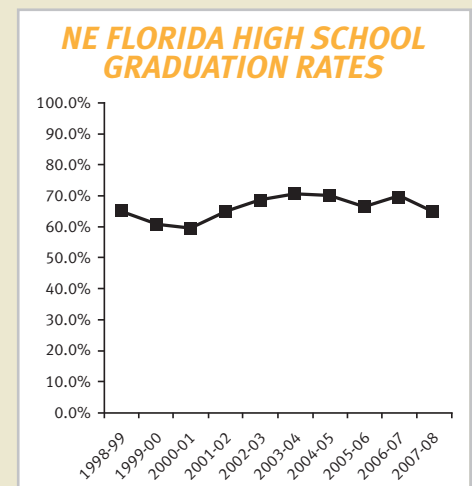


Success By 6 & Achievers For Life: Improving the Odds for Our Most Vulnerable Students

A TWO-YEAR PROGRESS REPORT



United Way and community partners focus on research-based strategies to target a challenge with far-reaching consequences: Northeast Florida's alarming dropout rate. Currently, 13 % of Duval County adults over 25 do not have a diploma or GED. Their failure and the lifelong struggle that follows impact us all. This is why United Way and community partners came together in 2006 to develop intervention initiatives for two critical groups: preschoolers at risk of starting kindergarten unprepared and 6th graders who have begun to disengage from academics. Second-year results for United Way's *Success By 6* and *Achievers For Life* demonstrate that when we **live united**, we can begin to move the needle on serious and persistent social problems. Share our vision: a future where children succeed in school, realize their potential, and become valuable, contributing citizens.



Florida School Indicators Report, Florida Department of Education.

THE FALLOUT OF DROPPING OUT

Northeast Florida's most pressing social problems have a common denominator: a two-decade decline in high school graduation rates. Currently, just 65.9% of Duval County students graduate on time. In many schools, the numbers are far worse, hitting as low as 59%.

The issues that lead to dropping out are complex and start early. The first five years of development are a critical period for learning. When children enter school without a basic knowledge of the world around them, their place in it, and the vocabulary and spatial skills they need to take the next steps in learning, they are at a disadvantage that can persist throughout their school career. Intervention at an early age through school readiness initiatives like United Way's *Success By 6* is the easiest and most cost-effective way to even the gaps that can lead to disengagement and dropping out.

The success of every student impacts us all. For the 33% of former Duval County high school students who have dropped out of school, the future is anything but rosy. Minus a diploma or GED, young dropouts are much more likely to be unemployed than their peers and to stay jobless longer, especially during an economic downturn. Education is the single most important factor in predicting a life of poverty, with almost 24% of adults who lack a high school diploma living below the poverty threshold nationwide.

High unemployment and poverty correlate strongly with elevated crime rates. And it all comes back to education: Today in Florida, nearly 75% of inmates are high school dropouts. Their failure has a high price tag, not only for victims of crime, but also for taxpayers who must foot the bill for incarceration expenses – to the tune of \$25,000 per year per inmate. Add that to cash and in-kind benefits that a dropout may need to survive and lost tax revenues when he or she fails to become self-sustaining, and the average high school dropout will cost taxpayers more than \$292,000. Dropouts during the 2008 year alone represent a \$1.2 billion loss to Northeast Florida's economy over the course of their lifetime.

Economists estimate that murder rates and aggravated assault rates fall 20% per 10% increase in graduation rates.

INCREASED GRADUATION RATES PREVENT VIOLENT CRIME		
Annual Impact of 10% High School Graduation Rate Increase		
	Homicides Prevented*	Aggravated Assault Prevented*
Baker	< 1	13.2
Clay	1	148.85
Duval	23.2	987
Nassau	< 1	120.4
St. Johns	< 1	121.1
Northeast Florida	25.4	1,390.8

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

UNITED WAY'S SUCCESS BY 6, YEAR TWO

Quality early learning develops the building blocks for success in elementary school. The *Success By 6* (SB6) early learning initiative relies on expert providers and a research-based curriculum that stresses critical skills for preschoolers, especially language acquisition, social maturation and knowledge development. The initiative started with six high-quality early learning centers in 2007. Great results from the pilot year triggered an expansion in 2008-09 to 14 centers, including two in Clay County, with preschoolers in two "cohort" groups:

- Cohort 1, consisting of preschoolers who started the program as three-year-olds in 2007. Moving to their second SB6 year in the fall of 2008, this group was funded in part through leveraged state dollars from the Florida Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) program, which covered half-day four-year-old preschool during the school year.
- Cohort 2, consisting of preschoolers who started the program as three-year-olds in 2008, with 10% of them from Clay County.

All children were from working families with incomes between 150 and 200 percent above the 2008 federal poverty threshold. This means they earned

between \$32,000 and \$42,000 for a family of four – too much to qualify for government assistance and too little to afford quality childcare. Parents promised to take an active part in the program by agreeing to:

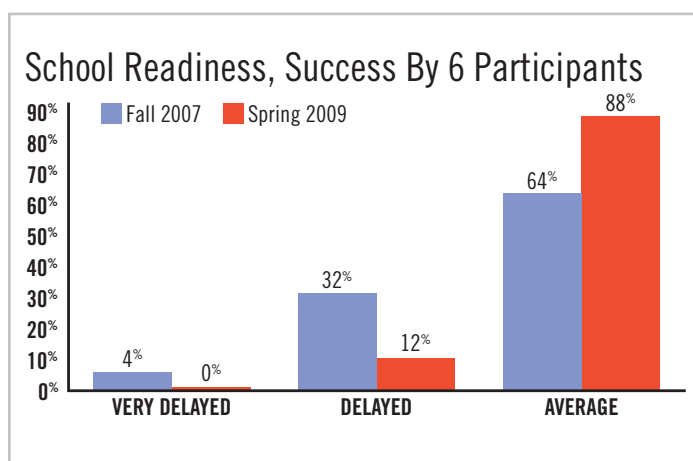
- make sure their child attended at least 85% of school days
- attend parent/teacher conferences and quarterly *Born Learning* workshops designed to help them enhance their child's learning

Year Two centers: All Saints Early Learning Center • Episcopal Children's Services-Exchange South • The Oaks • New Dimensions Learning Center • The Salvation Army Child Development Center • St. Catherine's Episcopal Preschool • Aldridge Day Care • Happy Acres Ranch • Methodist Children's Village • Punkin Place Child Development of Jacksonville • Christ the King Child Care • All About Kids, Inc. • Childtime Learning Center (Clay) • Gingerbread Learning Center (Clay)

Community partners play a vital role in United Way's *Success By 6*. They include Early Learning Coalition of Duval, Jacksonville Early Literacy Partnership, Early Learning Coalition of Clay, Nassau, Baker and Bradford, and Florida Institute of Education at the University of North Florida.

YEAR TWO SUCCESS BY 6 ACHIEVEMENTS

The Florida Institute of Education (FIE) at UNF evaluated 2008-09 SB6 results with two standardized tests that measure letter recognition, number sense and operations, time and sequence, language development, and school readiness. They tested the preschoolers who were completing their second and last year of the program and the students who had begun the year as three-year-olds. The FIE findings show that *Success By 6* is working:



- After their second year in SB6, 88% of students in Cohort 1 demonstrated school readiness – compared to 64% when they began the program.
- The percentage of four-year-olds who ranked below the 20th percentile on the Expressive Vocabulary Test was cut in half, falling from 32% to 16%.
- Four-year-old students had made statistically significant improvement in direction/position and time/sequence.
- After only one year in *Success By 6*, three-year-olds made significant gains in direction/position, texture/material, quantity, and time/sequence.

“It is so exciting to see how children enrolled in Success By 6 centers are catching up. We know that being ready to learn when they enter school gives children a lifetime advantage.”

— Susan Main, Executive Director, Early Learning Coalition of Duval.

UNITED WAY'S ACHIEVERS FOR LIFE, YEAR TWO

In its pilot year, United Way's dropout prevention strategy *Achievers For Life* (AFL) attained results that included an 11% increase in promotion rates and a 31% increase in GPA for *Achievers For Life* students. In school year 2008-09, 339 Duval County students in four Arlington and Springfield middle schools* were enrolled in AFL. Matched with mentors who met with them one-on-one each week, these 6th graders also benefited from access to counseling, family support, and services to help increase family involvement at school. Community partners for the program included Communities In Schools of Jacksonville, Duval County Public Schools, Jewish Family and Community Services, and the *Learning to Finish* Collaborative.

The AFL program is voluntary. Targeted students exhibit proven predictors of school disengagement:

- excessive absences
- a low FCAT Reading or Math score
- a low GPA or failure in math or language arts
- behavior/discipline problems

So that meaningful comparisons could be made at the end of the year, the results for 104 students (the Treatment Group, comprised of 6th graders enrolled in AFL in the first quarter) were studied. Their progress was charted against a same-size Comparison Group comprised of Duval County Public School (DCPS) 6th graders who matched up on race, sex, family income, 5th-grade absences, and 5th-grade FCAT Reading levels.

*AFL middle schools for school year 2008-09 were Arlington, Ft. Caroline, Matthew Gilbert, and Northwestern. This year, thanks to support from Michael Ward and matching funds obtained by Duval County Public Schools, AFL expanded to Forrest High feeder schools JEB Stuart and Jefferson Davis.

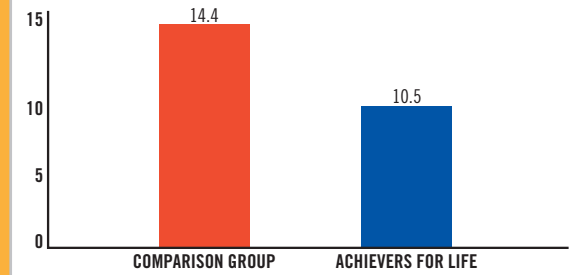
YEAR TWO *ACHIEVERS FOR LIFE* RESULTS

A survey of AFL Year Two participants, their families, and schools yielded overwhelmingly positive feedback. Ninety-four percent of school staff agreed with the statement that AFL helped connect the student to the school. Among surveyed AFL students, 86% felt that the help they got meant they would pass 6th grade, and 95% agreed that AFL helped them learn to be a better student. Ninety-eight percent of surveyed parents or caretakers felt that AFL helped their child, and the same percentage said they would recommend the program to friends.

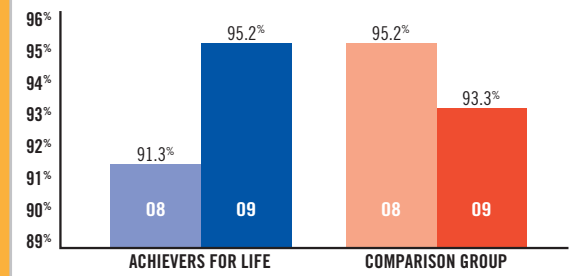
As it turned out, their instincts about AFL were correct. Second-year results show that on average, AFL students become more engaged and more successful in 6th grade – not less, as is typical with similar students:

- School absences for AFL students decreased by 25% between 5th and 6th grade. This is the reverse of typical behavior for at-risk middle schoolers.
- AFL student GPAs improved 20% between 5th and 6th grade. The Comparison Group, who started slightly higher, held steady in 6th grade. This means that AFL students are beginning to catch up to students who performed better than them in the previous year. With an increase to a 2.4 average, they are also approaching the 2.7 average of all DCPS 6th graders.
- AFL promotion rates improved in 6th grade, while the Comparison Group rates declined.
- AFL students gained 98.5 points in FCAT Reading, a 28-point higher gain than the average DCPS student, whose reading skills are better to begin with.
- AFL students made surprising gains in FCAT Math. Starting 6th grade significantly behind typical DCPS students on average, they gained 84.3 developmental scale points – compared to 49.5 in the Comparison Group and 33.8 for all DCPS 6th graders.
- AFL students failed fewer core courses in 6th grade than 5th. The opposite was true for the Comparison Group. Measured against the Comparison Group, AFL students experienced 26% fewer failures.

6th Grade Core Courses Failed per 100 Students



Promotion Rate, Year-over-Year



“The results speak for themselves. Achievers For Life’s components of mentors, family engagement and the extra focus on struggling students are helping to put students on track for success. From faculty to students to parents, every participant group in Achievers For Life is positive about its impact. Achievers For Life is an excellent example of a successful public/private partnership, and with all of us working together, we can provide the initiative to every 6th grade student who will benefit from this strategic support.” — Ed Pratt-Dannals, Superintendent, Duval County Public Schools.

PROFILE OF A DROPOUT-TO-BE

Dropping out of high school is almost always a gradual, drawn-out process. Typically, signs appear early. By middle school, a student at risk may begin to disengage. He or she may miss more and more school days and struggle with academic subjects, especially reading and math. Studies show that 6th grade is a make-or-break year for students with below-average reading skills. No longer learning to read, they must now read to learn. When that proves too difficult, and when they must also contend with issues like poverty, abuse, and parents or caregivers who have low expectations for their success, these students may begin to lose interest in school.

Research by Dr. Robert Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University, an expert on secondary school reform and the dropout problem, was the starting point for an extensive local study. Commissioned by *Learning to Finish*, a local collaboration that focuses on raising the graduation rate, Dr. Kenneth Wilburn of the University of North Florida analyzed Duval County Public Schools data to develop an “early warning system” that can help flag students at risk of dropping out. He identified low FCAT scores in 6th grade, failing a math or English course in 6th grade, and missing more than 20% of school as strong predictors of disengagement. Implicit in his early warning system is the challenge: Can we intervene early to change the course of a would-be dropout’s life?

ACHIEVERS FOR LIFE MENTOR MARCUS ROWE



Connecting with 6th grader Aubrey was a tall order for his *Achievers For Life* mentor Marcus Rowe. “Aubrey didn’t express his emotions all that well and lacked confidence in himself,” says Rowe. “When I asked him questions, he would either shake his head or give one-word responses.”

So Rowe got creative. During one of their weekly sessions at Aubrey’s middle school in Springfield, he moved the meeting outside to the basketball courts. While they were shooting hoops, Aubrey opened up about his academic struggles. “Since we weren’t sitting face to face, he felt more comfortable talking to me about his overall school experience,” Rowe remembers.

It turned out Aubrey had a lot to say. Luckily, Marcus was there to listen. Once he had earned Aubrey’s trust, he was able to build a relationship. During their weekly visits, the two completed homework assignments, played computer games that build math skills, or just sat and talked. Marcus’ “passion” for math (his real job is Financial Advisor at Merrill Lynch) was contagious, inspiring Aubrey to improve his attitude and behavior and bring his math grade up to a B+.



WHEN PARENTS BECOME TEACHERS

In Northeast Florida, between 18 and 35% of children entering kindergarten are not yet ready to learn language and literacy skills. Children from families at the lower end of the income scale suffer disproportionately. On average, they start kindergarten knowing 300 to 500 words. In contrast, their peers from middle class and high-income homes have an average vocabulary of 3,000 words. Helping children build vocabulary and other key literacy skills is an important goal for *Success By 6* – too important to be limited to childcare hours. That is why *Success By 6* parents must agree to attend free, interactive *Born Learning™* workshops that are also open to grandparents and other caregivers. With a curriculum drawn from research-based materials provided by United Way Worldwide, in partnership with Civitas (a national child development research institute) and the Ad Council, *Born Learning* shows parents how to turn everyday moments – from shopping to cooking to a walk around the block – into learning moments. Workshop topics include:

- Ages and Stages
- Dads Are Different
- Playing the Games
- Effective Discipline
- Learning on the Go
- Fun with Food and Fitness

Northeast Florida community partners for *Born Learning* are the Early Learning Coalition of Duval, the Jacksonville Children's Commission, Episcopal Children's Services, and United Way's Women in Local Leadership.

READ WHAT PARENT PARTICIPANTS HAVE SAID ABOUT *BORN LEARNING*:

- "I think Ms. Dove must know my girls, she is always right on target, great class."
- "I enjoyed learning new things especially from someone who does not act better than me."
- "I feed my children healthier because of this class."
- "This workshop saved our marriage, it was like the instructor had been watching us at home, she seemed to know exactly what we were struggling with at home."
- "I think all parents should take a parenting class like this. It teaches you a lot you didn't know."

UNITED WAY'S *SUCCESS BY 6* INTERVENES EARLY TO PROMOTE SCHOOL READINESS.

When 3-year-old Diana started in the *Success By 6* early learning initiative, she had trouble completing puzzles, counting, and repeating letter sounds.

One-on-one attention at Diana's new, high-quality early learning center has helped her acquire these important school readiness skills. Diana is now eager to learn, more creative at play, and excited to try new activities and games. "In the short period of time she has been enrolled in *Success By 6*, she has blossomed into an extroverted and very alert little girl," says her mom L'ubica. "Her vocabulary has grown and she is so talkative now."

