



Numbers don't tell whole story of dropouts (editorial)

Published: Thursday, June 30, 2011, 5:44 AM



By **Press-Register Editorial Board**



Mobile County
Public School
System

NO MATTER what program the Mobile County school system uses to target high school dropouts, it's not likely to pass the cost-effectiveness test. That's because getting dropouts to re-engage in education — and finish school — is a difficult and complicated task.

Does that mean that Mobile County shouldn't "shop around" for providers other than Alternatives Unlimited Inc., which runs 12 Drop Back In academies in the county?

Of course not, as long as the system confirms its commitment to keeping some kind of program in place, whether it pays immediate benefits or not.

Superintendent Roy Nichols will recommend to the school board today that the district renew its contract with Alternatives Unlimited of Baltimore. We're inclined to agree, given the approaching start date for school and the lack of knowledge about what other options are available.

Judging from the numbers alone, it would seem that \$4.4 million in state funding for the last two years is a lot of money to invest in a program that has graduated only 105 students.

About 1,000 dropouts, ages 17 to 20, have been enrolled in the program. Of those, an estimated 700 have quit for various reasons, and 170 are on track to graduate.

Among those who are sticking with the program are some real success stories. One is Phillip Reichert, who is featured in today's Press-Register.

His goal is to earn a degree and proceed to Bishop State Community College in a welding program. In his case, the investment paid off.

The problem for school systems is that it's often difficult to gauge the effectiveness of dropout programs — on a local or national level. Even the relatively successful programs have difficulty meeting a "strict benefit-cost test," says a report from The Future of Children project, a collaboration of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution.

The report goes on to conclude, rightly, that communities should keep offering multiple alternatives for dropouts, including academic and job-skills programs.

The University of South Alabama's College of Education estimates that about 3,000 students drop out of school each year in Mobile County and wind up in a life of poverty.

And the economy pays a heavy price. The economic impact of those dropouts adds up to \$1 billion once you count taxpayer-funded programs and the average lifetime salaries they would have earned had they gotten a diploma (which are higher than for GED recipients).

We understand why Mobile school board members would want to assure the public that they are spending tax dollars wisely.

As they compare dropout programs, however, it's important to remember that they may not necessarily deliver a big return on the investment — even though they're invaluable.

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