

The Greenville News

August 26, 2007

Volunteers drop in on potential dropouts

By Ron Barnett

STAFF WRITER

Nearly 20 students who were on the verge of dropping out of high school may have a new chance at life, after someone knocked on their door Saturday and told them they cared. About 150 volunteers, including the state superintendent of education, took to the streets to find Greenville County high school students who didn't show up for class last week to start the new year.

The effort, called "Opening Doors to Success Day," was organized by Graduate Greenville, a partnership of Greenville County Schools, the United Way of Greenville County and the Alliance for Quality Education and focused on the neighborhoods surrounding Greenville High and Berea High.

"It was a huge success," said Judy Snyder, director of Graduate Greenville. "I think the volunteers learned as much as the students did."

They got a first-hand look at the real-life circumstances of students who are ready to give up on school, she said.

"There were some incredible stories."

Eleven students from Berea and seven from the Greenville High area made commitments to get back in school, Snyder said.

The volunteers went to about 100 homes looking for students. Some of the houses were empty. In some cases they found out where the student had moved or what had happened to them even if they couldn't find them, Snyder said.

"You can't find that by calling a disconnected phone number," she said.

Graduate Greenville is a community-wide initiative to improve high school success and increase the graduation rate.

In addition to state Superintendent Jim Rex and district Superintendent Phinnize Fisher, the volunteers included several school board members and other elected officials, teachers, counselors, administrators, business people and parents.

Board chairman Tommie Reece and trustees Dan Moravec, Megan Hickerson, Lynda Leventis-Wells and Keith Ray took part in the effort.

Students they reached were given information on resources and options available to help them overcome any barriers to returning to school. Both high schools were open during the day to allow students to enroll.

Additional public high schools will participate in future years with the goal of all 14 Greenville high schools participating in three years.

The event is based on a successful program in Houston. Their walk last year focused on 16 high schools. Coupled with other dropout recovery efforts, 1,300 students returned to school with 207 graduating in May.

Graduate Greenville also offered a four-week summer enrichment program for 19 incoming freshmen at Berea High and put graduation coaches at Berea and Greenville high schools. Recruitment is under way for mentors for at-risk students at the two schools. A computerized early warning system to identify at-risk incoming ninth-graders is under development.

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