

# \$3 million grant to help combat school dropouts



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Alongside representatives from Greenville County Schools and the Riley Institute at Furman University, Ted Hendry, United Way of Greenville County president, announces the details of federal Social Innovation (SIF) grant. MYKAL McELDOWNEY/Staff

In the most challenging low-income schools in Greenville County, where poverty is pervasive and English is the second language for many students, the school district, United Way of Greenville County and the Riley Institute at Furman University will begin an innovative program to detect when students begin to slide down a path that eventually leads them to drop out of school.

The partners will use a \$3 million grant, and other funds that could total \$15 million over five years, to seek out students at risk of dropping out of school and intervene through school and community support.

Students often decide to drop out of school between fifth and eighth grades, research shows.

They mentally check out in middle school, though they don't physically leave until high school, said Burke Royster, superintendent of Greenville County Schools.

The partnership plans to build a real-time database of information on each student that will act as an early warning system for teachers and school counselors to recognize when students are beginning to veer off path.

The database will show when grades start to slip or students stop turning in homework, Royster said. It will tabulate truancy, tardiness and discipline issues and flag students for intervention.

A myriad of circumstances outside of the classroom affect how students perform in school, Royster said.

"The quicker we can identify there's an issue and get them to someone else who can really help them with that issue, then the quicker we can get them re-engaged in school," he said.

The United Way can then step in to offer support through medical care, transportation, housing or mentoring, said Ted Hendry, United Way president.

United Way of Greenville County was awarded the three-year, \$3 million Social Innovation Fund grant by the Corporation for National and Community Service. It is one of seven grant recipients in the country to get the federal boost to keep middle school students and their families on track, Hendry said.

The United Way will match the grant dollar-for-dollar, and grants from private foundations and corporations could boost the total to \$15 million, Hendry said. The Hollingsworth Fund, the Community Foundation of Greenville and Wells Fargo already have made commitments, Hendry said.

The system will go into effect at Tanglewood, Lakeview and Berea middle schools and Greenville Early College.

At Tanglewood, the majority of students live in poverty, and English is the second language for one-third of the school's 590 students (including some zoned for Tanglewood who attend Greenville Early College), said William Price, Tanglewood's principal.

Students' home environments add challenges that spill over into the classroom, Price said. Some 95 to 98 percent of Tanglewood students qualify for free or reduced lunch, many have been placed in the care of the Department of Social Services and others have mental health challenges, he said.

Research by Dr. Bob Balfanz of Johns Hopkins University shows that in high-poverty schools, if a student is absent 20 percent of the time, fails math or English or gets poor behavior grades, there is a 75 percent chance he or she will drop out of high school.

Outcomes are worse for middle school students who are held back. Those students are seven times more likely to eventually drop out, and 80 percent of students who repeat a class more than once will eventually drop out, according to Balfanz' research.

"I think when kids are unsuccessful for a period of time, it's just a matter of time before they physically give up," Price said.

Students in South Carolina are required to attend school until they turn 16, but Price said he talks to students in middle school who tell him they plan to drop out as soon as they can.

The scope of this new program, the evidence-based early warning system and the number of community groups who will become involved are enormous compared to the intervention programs already in place at Tanglewood, Price said.

The Riley Institute will measure the program's success by analyzing the data and tracking student turnaround after the school and United Way intervene to find out which programs work best to keep students in school, said Don Gordon, the Riley Institute's executive director.

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