



GET THAT DIPLOMA ! TASK FORCE

Final Report and Recommendations

February, 2007

Success for Geneva's Children

Ten Goals (revised 2006)

1. Children are born healthy.
2. Children have timely and appropriate preventive and primary health care.
3. Families and caregivers have sufficient economic resources to meet their children's basic needs.
4. Children have safe, stable, and nurturing environments in their homes, in the community, and in school.
5. Families and caregivers possess and practice child-rearing skills that promote optimal child development.
6. Children with special needs receive timely and appropriate services.
7. Children have the opportunity to attend quality early childhood and care programs.
8. Children attend quality schools and succeed.
9. The community and schools respect and foster diversity.
10. Families exercise their voices and their votes in strengthening the Geneva community.

The purpose of Success for Geneva's Children is to mobilize the Geneva community to improve the health and well being of children and their families. *Success* seeks to build effective interventions and supports for children and families knowing that such things have profound and long lasting beneficial impacts on the individual child, his/her family and the community.

Success began in 1997 as the result of the community needs assessment portion of Geneva Head Start's strategic plan. Members of the policy council decided not to limit their review to Head Start families but to focus on all of Geneva's families with young children. Since 1997, *Success* has produced and distributed five data reports and sponsored nine community Leadership Breakfasts. Data and information from these reports have been used to solicit funding for numerous projects in Geneva benefiting young children.

The 2004 report of the Educational Attainment of Geneva's Parents Task Force recommended the development of a comprehensive plan to address Geneva's relatively low high school completion rate. In 2006 a new group, the Get That Diploma! Task Force, began meeting to do just that. This report is the result of two years of work by a diverse group of community members who are passionate about the education of Geneva's young people.

Success for Geneva's Children welcomes any individual or organization dedicated to working with and for families with children. Through understanding the needs and interest of children and their parents, we collectively bring resources to improving their quality of life.

As you read this report please reflect on actions you can take to bring these recommendations to fruition.

Get That Diploma! Task Force

I. INTRODUCTION

Though high school completion rates have been generally rising since the 1940's, there is still a significant portion of the population that does not complete high school. Nationally, in 1999, about eighty-six percent (86%) of 18-24 year olds had completed high school, with about nine percent (9%) completing high school by taking a GED exam. (National Center of Education Statistics: Dropout Rates in the United States, 1999)

Geneva is not immune from this risk. According to U.S. Census figures (2000) almost twenty-two percent (22%) of Geneva residents over 25 had less than a high school education. Many, if not most, of these residents are parents trying to do their best for their families. However, without a high school degree they face significant economic hurdles.

In 2004, the Educational Attainment of Geneva's Parents Task Force made developing a comprehensive community wide plan to address our students' noncompletion one of their key recommendations.

A diverse group of community members have met over the last two years to review Geneva City School data, identify Geneva youths' risk factors and investigate current programs offered to youth at risk of leaving school without a degree. Our recommendations are based on the belief that students' failure to complete high school is a community problem requiring community solutions.

II. THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

Dropout Rates Don't Tell the Whole Story

Over the last three years the Geneva High School dropout rate has varied between 1.4 – 3.9%. (NYS School Report Card 2005) These percentages may look small but over time the actual numbers add up to a significant number of young people. During the school years 2000-2005 one-hundred-forty-six (146) students dropped out. (See Table 1)

Moreover, during the same time period an additional one-hundred-twenty-five (125) students left school to enter a GED program or enter an alternative high school setting to obtain a GED. (See Table 1) Many of these students failed or will fail to complete the GED program the first time through.

Because of the way many states define “dropout” and “completion”, many education researchers argue that the fairest way to calculate the completion or noncompletion rate of high school is to follow a 9th grade cohort through graduation comparing the number of freshman with the number of diplomas awarded. (See Table 2).

Geneva City Schools students starting 9th grade in 2000 and 2001 had an average graduation rate of seventy-five (75) percent and seventy-seven (77) percent respectively. This closely reflects the national graduation average. (See *The Average Freshman Graduation Rate for Public High Schools From the Common Core of Data: School Years 2002–03 and 2003-04*, National Center for Education Statistics, July 2006). However, the graduation rate for Geneva’s 2002 9th graders was only sixty-two (62) percent. (See Table 2) We do not have any ready explanation for this dramatic change.

During the last six school years Geneva has lost more than the equivalent of an entire class through noncompletion. Over two-hundred fifty young people are trying to make a living without a high school degree. How did these young people end up here?

TABLE 1. Number of Geneva High School Students Leaving School Without A High School Diploma

School Year	Number Students Dropped Out	Numbered Students Entered Alternative/GED Program	Total Students Leaving in School Year
2000-2001	38	18	56
2001-2002	20	18	38
2002-2003	28	19	47
2003-2004	34	19	53
2004-2005	13	31	44
2005-2006	13	20	33

(All data taken from New York State Report Cards or obtained from Geneva City School District.)

TABLE 2. Geneva High School Graduation History

School Year	Estimated Number First Time 9 th Graders *	Number Graduating Four Years Later	Average Freshman Graduation Rate
2000-2001	216	163	75%
2001-2002	197	151	77%
2002-2003	225	140	62%

(All data taken from New York State Report Cards or obtained from Geneva City School District.)

* Calculated using the average of the 8th, 9th and 10th grade students to account for retentions. (See *The Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate for Public High Schools From the Common Core of Data: School Years 2002-03 and 2003-04*, National Center for Education Statistics, July 2006)

III. FACTORS AFFECTING SCHOOL DROPOUT

Research indicates a wide range of factors affect students' ability to learn and succeed in school. These fall into four general categories or domains: individual, family, school and community. Individual factors affecting school success include poor school attitude, poor attendance/truancy, substance abuse, pregnancy, lack of English fluency, learning disabilities and poor peer relationships. Family risk factors include low socioeconomic status, ineffective parenting, a non-English speaking home, low parental expectations and family dysfunction. School factors include negative school climate, lack of adequate counseling, low expectations, lack of language instruction and ineffective discipline. Community related factors include lack of support services, lack of community support for schools, high crime rates, and failure to value youth. (See *dropoutprevention.org* website)

In determining the factors that are most significant to Geneva youth we relied on data collected through the Risk and Protective Survey carried out on three separate occasions between 2000 and 2005 at the Geneva Middle and Geneva High School by the Partnership for Ontario County. We also reviewed data collected as part of the Developmental Assets Survey conducted at the middle and high schools in 2003. We also relied on local census and demographic data.

The Risk and Protective Survey includes questions assessing the frequency of twenty-four (24) risk and protective factors that correlate with substance abuse. However, twelve (12) of these risk factors are also highly indicative of school dropout. These are

- Sensation seeking
- Impulsiveness
- Personal transitions and mobility
- Rebelliousness

- Favorable attitudes toward antisocial behavior
- Family conflict
- Family history of antisocial behavior
- Lack of supervision and rules
- Poor discipline
- Interactions with negative peers
- Little commitment to school
- Early initiation of problem behavior.

The most significant factors for Geneva Middle and High School students over that time period were

- Sensation seeking
- Favorable attitudes toward antisocial behavior
- Impulsiveness
- Rebelliousness

These factors are individual internal characteristics that translate into particular types of behavior, such as poor school attendance/truancy, pregnancy and behavior/discipline problems.

The Developmental Asset Survey uses forty (40) assets, twenty (20) of them external and twenty (20) of them internal, to measure youth wellbeing. We consider the following seven (7) assets significant because they have the lowest frequency among Geneva Middle and High School students [thirty (30) percent or less] or show significant changes in frequency across grade levels:

- Caring school climate
- Community values youth
- Youth seen as resources
- Adult role models
- Creative activities
- Restraint
- Planning and decision making

The low frequency of the Restraint and Planning Assets correlates with our students' high frequency of impulsiveness on the Risk and Protective Survey.

Individual Domain Risk Factors

Because the most significant Risk and Protective factors were internal characteristics, we collected data on behaviors we believe reflect those internal characteristics.

Geneva students exhibit a high rate of poor attendance/truancy. At the end of the third marking period of the 2005-2006 school year twenty-five (25) Geneva High School students had missed twenty (20) percent of the school year (30/150 days). Ninety-three (93) students had missed ten (10) percent of the school year (15/150 days).

There was a significant increase in the number of teen pregnancies in the middle and high schools during the 2005-2006 school year. Exact numbers are difficult to come by but community members all noted the increase.

Behavior problems during school led Geneva to have suspension rates of between six (6) and eight (8) percent between 2000 and 2004. (See New York State School Report Cards) To begin to address this issue, the school district instituted a “structured studies” program in 2005. This school based program is designed to generally replace external suspensions in hopes that there would be fewer suspensions and that suspension time would have an educational value for the suspended student.

There are a significant number of students who speak English as a second language. Thirty-one (31) middle and high school students receive English as a Second Language services. District wide eighty-three (83) students are classified as limited English proficient. This does not take into account the large number of children whose parent’s first language is not English.

A significant percentage of Geneva students have learning challenges and receive special education services. In 2005-2006 there were three-hundred-fifty-one (351) classified students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. An additional seventy-nine (79) preschool children in the district received special education services. In 2004-2005, nineteen (19) percent of elementary and secondary students received special education services compared with thirteen (13) percent in Ontario County. (See Success Data Report 2005)

Family Domain Risk Factors

A significant number of families in Geneva are poor. In the 2004-2005 school year 46.3 percent of Geneva students were eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Family violence affects Geneva students. In 2004 Geneva’s rate of indicated child abuse (77 incidents/1000 families) was more than twice the rate of the rest of Ontario County and this rate has been increasing since 1998. (See Success Data Report 2005)

Low parental education adversely affects student achievement. Twenty-six (26) percent of new mothers in Geneva did not have a high school diploma in 2001-2002 compared with fourteen (14) percent county wide. (See Success Data Report 2005)

School Domain Risk Factors

Geneva Middle and High School students do not consider their schools a “caring environment”. In the 2003 Developmental Assets Survey, only twenty-eight (28) percent of middle and high school students saw their schools as “caring”.

The secondary schools suffer from a lack of engaged parents. Volunteerism among parents drops off significantly as students enter middle school. PTA and Home and School involvement also declines. A recent Geneva Middle School parent initiative is actively working to bring more parents into the school to act as greeters, and classroom and lunchroom aides.

Alternative instructional settings for students who learn differently are very limited. The BOCES alternative high school, the School for Experiential learning, has only limited space for Geneva students. There is no BOCES alternative middle school currently available.

Middle and high school students with limited English proficiency need additional instruction and support. Secondary students arriving in Geneva with limited or no English skills drop out of school very quickly unless the language issue is addressed.

Truancy and tardiness are significant problems at both the middle and high school. The large number of truant and tardy students negatively affects the overall school environment. Students with truancy and/or tardiness issues are often disengaging from school and are “on their way out”. The district has recently begun addressing the tardiness issue with its “7:46 is too late” campaign.

Community Domain Risk Factors

Students in the 2003 Developmental Asset Survey identified several community-wide weaknesses. Significant numbers of students do not feel that youth are valued or that they are seen as resources for the community.

Youth also indicated there is a lack of adult role models. A lack of creative (arts related) activities was also identified.

A detailed resource inventory conducted by Jordan Kane, a William Smith student, determined that Geneva does not have services or programs available for youth that address the most significant individual risk factors; sensation-seeking, rebelliousness, impulsiveness and favorable attitudes toward antisocial behavior.

IV. RESOURCES AND STRENGTHS

A. Collaboration

There is a strong history of agencies cooperating and collaborating to provide services to Geneva families. *Success* and the task forces that flow from it provide useful models for tackling new substantive issues.

B. Accessing youth resources

A printed Youth Resource Directory and the FLKIDS website make finding youth programs relatively easy. Agencies are beginning to work on a “no wrong door” referral process that would allow a consumer to contact any agency and get through the “door” of another agency without having to make additional phone calls, visits, etc. This is intended to make referrals seamless and access much easier.

C. Social/Recreational Youth Development

Geneva has a wide variety of social/recreational programs. We are particularly strong in sports, i.e. baseball, lacrosse, basketball, soccer. We also have district-wide afterschool programming through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant. There are many other youth development opportunities including 4-H, Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, the Boys & Girls Clubs, and YMCA. We have some gaps in arts and mentoring programs.

D. Vocational Education

Wayne-Finger Lakes BOCES provides a diverse group of vocational programming that many of our students take advantage of. New classes include, New Horizons Medical, New Horizons Engineering, Drafting/CAD that exist alongside

traditional classes like Automotive Technology and Cosmetology. In addition, students take regular academic class or prepare for a GED.

E. Development of In-house GED program

Geneva High School has developed an in-house GED program that offers small group instruction, one-to-one teaching time and educational support to our most at-risk students. These students would not be successful in a traditional GED program, but are successful here. This is an example of using individualized, flexible programs to reach at-risk youth. (See *The Silent Epidemic*)

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

This Task Force has been aptly named the “Get That Diploma! Task Force because our group is about insuring more Geneva youth get a diploma. We have defined the term “diploma” broadly to include a GED as well as a local or Regents diploma. We have done this, not because we have low expectations for our students, but because students who receive a GED are able to access employment and higher education like those with “regular” diplomas. There are youth for whom a regular education setting will not work, despite everyone’s best efforts, so we believe having a supportive in-school GED program provides these students with an education they can build on. However, the majority of the recommendations of this Task Force are designed to lead to greater numbers of students graduating with Regents diplomas.

A. General Principles

To truly support our students at risk of dropping out we must work as a team. Community agencies, schools, parents and young people must coordinate their efforts to avoid duplication and to maximize their effect.

We must maintain a consistent effort on this issue. Gathering a group of people every couple of years to discuss our high school completion rate will not get the job done.

Our efforts must be culturally sensitive. Interventions and services must be provided keeping in mind the multicultural city in which we live and our young people live.

Youth must be consulted. How do we know what youth need if we don't ask? A youth voice will help keep us focused on their needs.

Efforts to increase the graduation rate will not be successful unless we can engage families in this process. Parents of Geneva students should be involved in the decision-making phase of program development. Involving parents in the middle school and high school should be a priority.

B. Key Components

1. Early Identification

- Evaluation of every 5th grade student and 8th grade student for the presence of critical risk factors in order to provide appropriate services as the students enter middle or high school. The evaluation should be brief but targeted to the most critical factors to identify students at-risk of dropping out, (i.e. ESL, Special Education, Behavioral/Academic skills, mental health issues.)

2. Coordinated Planning

- A group composed of community members, school representatives, agency representatives, government leaders and youth should work together to decide on needs, prioritize and collaborate on any necessary program development, and the requisite regional and/or multi-agency funding initiatives. This type of planning ensures citizen buy-in and deliberative decision-making which are extremely important for successfully addressing this complex problem.

3. Ongoing Monitoring

- Any programmatic efforts to address the graduation rate should be evaluated and the results released to the public. Agencies and schools should share information to ensure best-practices are being used.

3. Interventions and Service Delivery

- Any additional programs or services for at-risk middle or high school students should be developed to be

delivered as early as possible in a student's academic career; should be provided as quickly as possible and as intensively as possible. Care should be taken to ensure consistent services over time. A little bit of something is not always better than nothing.

C. Most Immediate Interventions Needed

1. Youth Advocate/ Coordinated Child Services

Josh is a sixteen year old sophomore who is living with friends because of a fight he got into with his mother's abusive boyfriend. He walks to school but as it has gotten colder out he hasn't been showing up much for school. He does not have a winter coat. He's been thinking about dropping out.

Imagine the effort it takes for Josh to get to school. Now imagine what it would take to keep Josh in school, stable housing, appropriate clothes, academic support services or maybe special education services, counseling.

Accessing this vast array of support and services would be more than most adults could deal with. We believe that if Josh had an advocate, one person who would be responsible for putting things in place, he could go to school, or to a GED program if that would be more appropriate. This type of program could be delivered by agencies or schools, paid staff or volunteer advocates or mentors.

2. Coordinated crisis intervention

Josh has gotten kicked out of his friend's house because there wasn't enough room when his friend's sister moved back home. Josh is now sleeping on the couch at one friend's house but can't stay there for long. There isn't much food at the house. Josh's mother never applied for free or reduced lunch at school.

Josh has an even more immediate crisis now. He needs several types of emergency services from several different providers. Without transportation how will he get it? How will he make phone calls? Until the crisis is resolved Josh can't be expected

to be on top of things at school. The answer is a one-stop crisis services for teens.

3. Truancy prevention program

Josh has ten unexcused absences over the last five weeks. He is now considered truant by the school's definition.

What can and should the school do? What types of consequences will make him show up for school? What else can the school do to make it easier for Josh to get to school? The district has begun addressing tardiness at Geneva High. Chronic tardiness and truancy reflect a student's disengagement with school and is highly associated with dropping out. We recommend the school develop, with community input and support, a plan to address truancy as well, to get more of our students in the building on a regular basis.

4. Mentoring

Alex is a seventh grader whose family just moved here from New York City. His mother is raising her three children on her own. Alex isn't involved with any afterschool activities and comes home to an empty house after school.

Alex would benefit from a mentor, an adult role model to spend time with. Having adult role models is a protective asset for youth. Though Geneva has a few small mentoring programs, there are many more kids who need them.

5. Enhanced services for non-English speaking students

Alex was born in Puerto Rico and until six months ago lived there. He's been in two different schools this year, first in NYC

and now here. He speaks some English but doesn't understand what's going on in class.

Alex will qualify for ESL services. However, because of his age he will need more than the required time-limited services. ESL services for secondary students need to be appropriate to the age of the student and must account for age related variations in language acquisition. The school district should recruit bilingual instructors and staff in all content areas, not just ESL.

6. Explore alternative educational settings and strategies for both middle and high school students

According to Alex's teachers he is struggling to learn in their classrooms when they lecture or use classroom discussion to teach. However, he does very well in Technology and on projects in his academic classes.

Alex appears to be an experiential or kinesthetic learner. Given his other challenges, language and recent relocations, perhaps an alternative middle school would be a better placement for him. Alternative educational settings are an important part of helping at-risk youth stay in school. (See *The Silent Epidemic*) However, Geneva does not have an alternative middle school and only a very limited number of our high school students can be enrolled at the BOCES School of Experiential Learning. While Geneva did operate an alternative middle school briefly, it was not continued. We should explore the development of an alternative middle school that would serve our students and perhaps draw other districts' alternative learners.

VI. TASK FORCE MEMBERS

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VII. REFERENCES

For additional information the following references are provided:

www.dropoutprevention.org

National Dropout Prevention Center/Network

www.flkids.com

Information on family and youth services in Ontario
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