



ENVISION

Creating Meaningful Change in Our Community

**COMMUNITY-WIDE
EDUCATION DIALOGUE**

Executive Summary

by
P-16+ Education Task Force
of
ENVISION

Reported April 4, 2007

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Task Force Recommendations.....	3
II.	Task Force Background.....	8
III.	Overview of the Community-wide Education Dialogue.....	11
IV.	Employer Dialogue	11
V.	Parent Dialogue	14
	Dothan City Schools.....	15
	Houston County Schools.....	16
	Private Schools	16
VI.	High School Student Dialogue	16
	Dothan City Schools.....	17
	Houston County Schools	20
	Private Schools	21
VII.	High School Teacher Dialogue	21
VIII.	Recent High School Graduate Dialogue	22
IX.	Summary	23
X.	Acknowledgements.....	24
XI.	P-16+ Education Task Force Members.....	25

I. Task Force Recommendations

The P-16+ Education Task Force of ENVISION has completed an intensive research and input activity called the ***Community-wide Education Dialogue***. In the next few weeks, the Task Force will do the following:

- Host a high school student forum
- Review the Dialogue input in relationship to the charges from the ENVISION Steering Committee to select projects appropriate for grassroots leadership
 - Specify outcomes we wish to accomplish in the next 1-3 years.
 - Expand our ranks to include many more volunteers within a structured setting of specific goal-oriented actions.
 - Set benchmarks and determine resources (if any) needed to accomplish its goals.
 - Submit plans to the Steering Committee for their review and approval.
- Review the Dialogue input and information about projects already underway in the community to determine where and how the Task Force can be supportive of these efforts.

The Task Force considers it to be their charge as part of ENVISION, and their responsibility as citizens of this community, to take an active role in the activities and **the work** that will be required to bring about meaningful, positive changes for our local education system(s). In each part of the Dialogue, we asked and received names of stakeholders who want to be involved in crafting and implementing solutions. Through ENVISION, we pledge to make opportunities available to these and to all area citizens who are committed to change and ready to roll up their sleeves.

In addition, and as promised to the boards and leadership of the participating schools/systems, the Task Force has reviewed and discussed the Dialogue input at length, and respectfully makes the following observations and recommendations to school leaders in city and county (both public and private systems) and to the entire community in support of education.

- Involvement of key stakeholders such as the groups included in the Community-Wide Education Dialogue must be increased and qualitatively enhanced. The number of individuals who chose to participate in the Dialogue (particularly the high school student and parent components) clearly demonstrates that those who are immediately impacted by education in our community want to take active roles in solving problems. Moreover, they have ideas that should be considered and they have the most to gain or lose.

- School systems should recognize the need for broad-based support of any proposed reforms and include constituents from the beginning of the process. Forums on finite issues such as school consolidation, et al, may bring out a vocal and emotional minority of stakeholders. But according to the Dialogue, organizational issues such as these are not the key issues for parents, students, teachers, and employers. There is a difference between developing a plan through grassroots participation and minimizing resistance to proposed structural changes. The Dothan City Schools should engage in open forums on the full set of issues that drove development of their Strategic Plan and be willing to reconsider directions and options. The Houston County Schools should begin their strategic planning with open forums and with committee structures that include representatives from major stakeholder groups.
- Overwhelmingly, the issues raised by the stakeholder groups are the same for DCS and HCS, yet in almost all cases, solutions are being developed in isolation from one another. Have the systems considered working on their strategic objectives together; pooling resources; seeking and applying community support in concert as opposed to working as separate systems? This is not a recommendation for political merger, but rather for proactive planning and implementation.
- Both Dothan City and Houston County Schools are struggling to reinvent their career/technical education programs. These are among the most expensive programs in schools, and vocational education allocations seldom allow programs to keep up with workplace trends. At the same time, parents and employers are calling upon schools to focus more on broad-based academics and skills such as critical thinking, interpersonal dynamics, etc.... The school systems should work together with the local community colleges to share students and share resources, allowing each level of education to focus on what it does best and make better use of key resources.
- Programs (specifically options) are the important issues for education stakeholders. School systems should take full advantage of the fact that parents and students are earnestly concerned with course availability, involve both cohorts in identifying desired courses and programs, then work together (with the local colleges, universities, and non-academic organizations such as museums, businesses, etc.) to make these academic options available to students.
- The concept of a ninth grade academy (with or without separate school locations) has merit in terms of orienting students to a more self-dependent environment. However, the program and services (not the need to relocate students) should drive development of this academy.

The fact that high school teachers did not mention the ninth grade academy as a recommended innovation indicates that broader discussion, involving both parents and students, should take place before this structure is adopted. (If it is a good concept, the Houston County Schools may want to participate in the discussion.)

- Parents participating in the Dialogue have identified success stories in our local schools. These should be noted, celebrated, and replicated. Specifically, the tenets of the magnet schools (with regard to high expectations for students, parents, and educators) should be studied and replicated throughout all of the public schools in the area.
- DCS should consider taking a much broader approach to development of “academies” than may be planned at present. If the research regarding small learning communities (including academy systems) has been pre-determined to be the cornerstone for a new curriculum in Dothan City Schools, planners are strongly urged to consider that there was almost no request by Dialogue participants for the specific types of academies currently under consideration. The only curricular area receiving substantial support by students and parents was “the arts.” Small learning communities within schools, clustered around the arts, would have stronger support within the schools and the community, be less expensive, require less retraining of current personnel, and respond positively to a strong voice coming from Dialogue participants. It also addresses another concern discussed by the Task Force---that of career obsolescence. It is extremely difficult to create an academy for a career in a field such as technology or business with any expectation that the skills learned in grades 10-12 will be applicable to those fields when those students are ready to enter their professions.
- According to students and employers, relevance is lacking in the current educational program. However, relevance does not equal career education. The latter is a subset (and only one form) of the former. Both school systems should look closely at the relevance of courses and instruction, and determine ways in which to make learning meaningful for 21st century students. This does not mean teachers should be required to entertain students. But it is important to recognize that while learning-style adaptations may have been a nicety 20 years ago, they are critical components of teaching strategies for today’s children.
- Both systems should reconsider schedule options for classes. The block schedule system does not appear to be working in terms of performance outcomes, and it is not (as once proposed) alleviating boredom in the classrooms. In fact, the opposite seems to be occurring.

- High school students should not be required to remain at school to take classes they neither need nor want. Systems should work with the community college and local university to begin/augment early admission and dual enrollment options. (NOTE: Florida high schoolers can graduate from the 12th grade with an associate's degree in-hand; Madison County, Alabama, has programs that local schools should consider.) While parents may feel better knowing their children are in a public school building until 3:00 PM, high schools are not day care centers. Students who do not want to be in school or do not need to be in classes should not be held captive. College courses, work, community service are all options especially for seniors who have accumulated all or most of their needed credits. Co-op programs and internships should be expanded.
- School systems and the community at large must find effective, sustainable resources to **return the arts** to area public schools at all grade levels. The Task Force further recommends that the schools work with the students to determine what they mean by "the arts." It is likely that the standard art appreciation course is not applicable to today's high school students. Implementing archaic curricula will not meet the need expressed by the students.
- The schools and the community (including the business community) should create opportunities for field trips and other curriculum-based enrichment activities outside of the classroom.
- Teachers should be involved in addressing the issue of how they are perceived by their students. The Task Force is not suggesting that teaching should equate to a popularity contest. However, something is occurring, particularly in Dothan City Schools, between the early grades where parents are effusive in their praise of teachers (and we must assume some of that opinion comes from their children) and the high schools where students do not feel that teachers want to be there. There is undoubtedly also a role for the community to play in valuing the teaching profession.
- Dothan City Schools should look beyond Chattanooga and Okaloosa County for models. These systems have found structures that meet the needs of their communities, and these appear to cluster heavily around vocational or career education. This may or may not be the best model for Dothan City Schools, and based upon the requests of students and parents, is less likely to be a good fit here.
- Involve students in decisions---start with the dress code and ID issues. Discuss why these are needed, without promising to change any rules,

agree to listen to student concerns. The recommendation that non-instructional punishments be considered for these behavioral infractions seems to the Task Force to be something worth considering. For the County—if they are considering an ID system, take a lesson from the DCS system and involve the students in formulation of the policy and punishments before implementing the rules. The Task Force may include this issue in the student forum.

- School systems must relieve counselors of clerical and administrative support/extension duties to enable them to do that for which they are trained. There is likely no debate on this issue; school administrators, teachers, counselors, and board members would like to be able to do this. It is a fiscal issue. As this community considers increasing resources for local schools, this should be a priority item. It is suggested that some of the funding from the 1-cent sales tax could be allocated to provide clerical support to both the City and County Systems so that counselors can perform professional duties critical to child development.
- Computerize the scheduling process----colleges have databases that establish each student's program of study, completed pre-requisites, suggested "next" classes, and trial schedule options. The same should be available for high school students. The Task Force recognizes that this would be a large initial undertaking and expenditure. But once in place—it accomplishes: 1) freeing counselors from a major paperwork load; 2) enabling students to have more input into their schedule of classes; 3) providing substantial information for parents and opportunities for their input into their child's educational program; 4) giving earlier and more in depth student information to teachers preparing for classes; 5) tracking historical data sets that would be valuable for resource allocation, long-range planning, and (eventually) performance assessment.
- The need for accurate data and factual measures of persistence, performance, and value-added is paramount. If the State of Alabama persists in documenting school performance using the present formula/methods, it is paramount that Dothan City Schools and Houston County Schools have the courage to develop and pilot truthful, accurate, and meaningful data systems that enable good decision-making for our children and for this community.
- School must identify and address student characteristics (social, academic, behavioral, etc...) that are counterproductive to academic achievement and work extensively with these children in the early grades. While legislation on "tracking" is long-standing, it is clear that current melting-pot systems are hurting children (those in need of

intervention and others), demoralizing teachers, and creating fictitious methods of accountability. Moreover, they are not fooling children who know that they are in need of something more. Children should not be stigmatized, but neither should their needs be downplayed or their problems be allowed to negatively impact the classroom community. The Task Force recognizes that this is not an easy issue to address. But there must be programs in existence that have more successfully dealt with the challenge. If not, it is time to develop an excellent intervention program and then, if necessary, lobby for its acceptance.

II. Task Force Background

From October 2005 to March 2006, Dothan City and Houston County, partnering with the Dothan Area Chamber of Commerce, the Wiregrass Foundation, and the Chamber Foundation conducted a competitive assessment and a community input project culminating in the *ENVISION Community Strategic Plan*. (Complete records of this process are maintained by the Dothan Area Chamber of Commerce Office, and summary data along with implementation updates can be obtained by visiting www.envisiondothan.com.) The process resulted in formation of four task forces:

- P-16+ Education(Pre-Kindergarten through graduate school)
- Quality of Life
- Effective Regionalism
- Growing the Economy

The P-16+ Education Task Force (Education Task Force; Task Force) held its organizational meeting on September 29, 2006, and reviewed the primary goal and the five objectives assigned by the ENVISION Steering Committee:

GOAL: Develop a seamless Pre-K to 16 education and workforce system.

- **Objective 1:** Work to address issues of Pre-K-12 public school performance, preparedness, and perception.
- **Objective 2:** Maximize the impact of the region's higher education institutions on the local workforce and economy.
- **Objective 3:** Provide the supportive resources necessary to develop a competitive workforce.
- **Objective 4:** Work to address issues of poverty, drug use, and teenage pregnancy.
- **Objective 5:** Retain and attract "knowledge" workers and young college graduate in Dothan and the Wiregrass region.

The Steering Committee charged the Task Force to focus its first-year initiatives on the challenges facing Dothan City Schools and area education in grades pre-K through high school. The Task Force quickly adopted the position (echoed by the Steering Committee) that although the term “workforce” is prevalent throughout the *ENVISION Community Strategic Plan*, it is not intended to be restricted to vocational or career education. Education, public education specifically, should enable students to enter “the workforce”—although levels of preparation and stages of entry may differ widely. However, a productive society is dependent upon more than workplace skills. The Education Task Force quickly determined that it would include in its work a much broader definition of education than the term “workforce” initially implies.

Task Force members began by educating themselves about school issues in general and Dothan City Schools, specifically. Federally- and state-compiled data sets regarding a variety of performance measures and demographic and historical profiles were collected, reviewed, shared, and discussed. Members visited local schools, reviewed copies of the Dothan City Strategic Plan for Excellence, and were invited to participate in briefings by DCS consultant, Dr. Jesse Register. The Task Force also shared information on national or statewide education studies conducted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Alabama Policy Institute, A+, PARCA, et al.

There are many good things going on in our local schools. Task Force members observed clean and attractive buildings (often despite the advanced ages of the facilities.) We were guided on school tours by students who genuinely appreciated their schools and their teachers. We read encouraging reports from the Alabama State Department regarding improvements in early grade reading due, it is assumed, to the Alabama Reading Initiative. We listened to summaries of initiatives underway by local educators to try to meet existing challenges (those highlighted in the *ENVISION Strategic Plan*, et al.) We agreed with the subtext of the *ENVISION Plan* that some of the criticisms aimed at local public education, the Dothan City System in particular, may be perception---that some of the detractors have not set foot in a local public school for sometime. Nevertheless, the Task Force also agreed that perception can be as damaging as reality, especially when it leads to reduced enrollment and/or reluctance by area citizens to increase support (read: funding) for local schools.

However, despite the affective responses to what we saw and heard, data underscore real problems. What we are doing in our public schools in our community and in the United States in general is not working. While No Child Left Behind has set lofty goals for student “proficiency” and achievement, it has also given rise to a new series of performance indicators that are no more accurate than existing measures. Formulae and calculations adopted by this state (and by many others) incorporate too many fuzzy definitions (some that

unfairly harm reputations of good schools) and loopholes (that unfairly “pass” schools that are not performing. A clear case for the Task Force—the use of the within-year dropout rate opposed to a cohort-based, successful completion rate that would tell a different story. Our schools and our state attempt to highlight academic improvement, yet the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), though far from a perfect instrument, clearly and consistently places Alabama students (including area high school students about to enter college and/or the workforce) below the mean.

The original ENVISION process highlighted data indicating that students have been leaving the Dothan City Schools for county, private, or home-school options. Based on this demographic trend, the Task Force expected to see markedly different graduation, persistence, and performance data for city vs. county schools. However, this is not the case. The critical performance measures for both area public systems are nearly mirror images from grades 6 thru 12. These scores are close to Alabama averages, which continue to rank at the bottom in national ratings of our public schools. The news gets worse when we consider that our nation often ranks well behind other countries in selected comparisons. (NOTE: the Task Force acknowledged that many international comparisons are skewed by the fact that the U.S. attempts to educate as many students as possible for as long as possible, thereby including a much larger number of low academic achievers in testing data. This, however, is an observation, not an excuse.) One of the most startling conclusions by the Task Force to-date is that although the majority of public criticism seems aimed at the Dothan City System, the realities and the emerging perceptions of the Houston County System are not much different. They have the same real problems, and are incubating the same image crises as exist in the City System.

The tasks suggested by the ENVISION process coupled with the challenges identified by the TF with regard to local schools left us with a critical question: ***Where do we start? To what activities do we commit our time and energy, and encourage similar commitments by many others in the community, and hope to have a major impact on the current educational situation?*** ENVISION is supposed to be a broad-based community initiative, and we needed to know what issues or actions were most important to the education stakeholders in this community. The original ENVISION community input process was not designed to be a referendum on education. Input received along with data reviewed during the assessment process pointed to issues, not broadly-supported solutions. Similarly the *Dothan Strategic Plan for Excellence*, while posing solutions to some key problems, was an insular document—developed almost entirely by educators. (NOTE: the high school portion of the Plan included only one teacher—other members were counselors and administrators.) The Task Force wanted information directly from those who are currently, immediately impacted by local education. More importantly, we wanted to hear their suggestions for change. We needed to ask.

III. Overview of the Community-wide Education Dialogue

Although there are many stakeholders in education, the Task Force selected five cohorts: 1) employers, 2) parents of current school children, 3) current high school students, 4) current high school teachers, and 5) recent graduates of local K-12 schools who are now enrolled in certificate, two-year, or four-year degree programs. The decision to conduct the Community-wide Education Dialogue with these groups was made with the realization that it was necessary to compile results and provide summaries by the first week of April 2007. The main reasons for the timeline were: 1) desire to obtain all information required from students before getting too close to the end of the school year; and 2) need to provide input for Dothan City School leaders prior to adoption of reform recommendations in April.

IV. Employer Dialogue (workshop)

General discussion during the Employer Workshop paralleled many of the observations and recommendations stated by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in their document *Leaders and Laggards: A State-by State Report Card on Educational Effectiveness*. Current high school graduates, as a group, are not meeting the entry level needs of area employers. This is true for specific vocational skill sets and for general education. Current mandated testing (samples reviewed during the workshop) are not in-sync with employer needs, and there is an employer-perceived lack of rigor in the public school curriculum. However, the workshop discussion was focused, by design, on local school systems—specifically Dothan City Schools and Houston County Schools. The workshop was convened at Wallace Community College on Thursday, February 15, 2007. Specific questions were deliberated on during the evening as shown below:

What are the needs of Employer Organizations?

- **5 key things you expect from a new employee.**
- **What are the Deficiencies you presently have to work through with current employees?**
- **Content of the tests: Applicability of the methods of screening used to find the employees that you need**
- **If you were Superintendent for a day**
 - **What academy would you want to set up?**
 - **Why?**

Feedback given during the evening can be summarized as follows. **The needs of business and industry are proficiency in basic math skills, critical thinking skills, positive work ethic, written and verbal skills, and interpersonal skills. If we get the above basics in an employee, then business has a foundation to build on.** (More detail is set out below to support this summary.)

Concerning the deficiencies: **From the feedback that was given, it can be summarized that what is seen today is the exact opposite of what employers are looking for as stated above.**

Concerning the tests used: **The tests are not geared to bring to the forefront candidates who would demonstrate the skills that are needed in the work place.**

There were five strong themes that repeated through this work session:

- (1) A 9th grade academy may be the best place to start to establish the basic skills needed in the work place (this applies to all students; they will all end up in some endeavor for pay).
- (2) The basic skills should be reinforced at every step through the 12th grade.
- (3) Make the curriculum more relevant to real life.
- (4) Enrich the education process with practical experience within an academic structure.
- (5) Mentors should be used from industry and business to reinforce the need to excel in what the work place needs.

Detailed feedback: **The dialogue through the evening brought the following response to these questions.**

5 key things you expect from a new employee

(Note: The numbers shown represent the number of times this item was brought up during the work session.)

Proficient in basic math skills (3)

- Without the use of a calculator (2) critically think about information given and act upon that understanding
- Handle word problems

Critical thinking skills (3)

- Problem solving abilities

Demonstrate a positive work ethic (3)

- Dress
- Professionalism
- Attendance
- Self motivated
- Responsible
- Timeliness (2)
- Drug free

Written and verbal skills (3)

- Good grammar & punctuation
- Reading comprehension (3)
- Good verbal skills (2)
- Able group communicator (2)
- Can think on his/her feet

Interpersonal skills (2)

- Know how to work in a team and have sound team building skills

What are the Deficiencies you presently have to work through with new employees?

The specifics stated during the evening were:

- Use of written skills is limited
- Can only function on an 8th grade level:
 - Poor grammar
 - Cannot complete simple tasks
 - Limited academic electives taken to supplement the basics
- Writing, speaking and analyzing data are major voids at all levels of employment
- There is presently an over reliance on technology

Content of the tests: Applicability of the methods of screening used to find the employees you need

Through the evening discussion brought general consensus concerning the test instruments currently used by industry and business as being weak and over simplified. They are not geared to bring to the forefront candidates who would demonstrate the skills that are needed in the work place.

If you were Superintendent for a day:

- **What academy would you want to set up?**

- Health Science / Health care industry (2)
 - A 9th Grade academy (2)
 - IT
 - Public works
 - Teaching
 - No academy
- **Why?**
 - 9th Grade academy is needed to focus on:
 - Basic skills
 - Work ethic
 - Problem solving
 - Leadership
 - Make curriculum more relevant to real life
 - Enrich with practical experience within an academic structure
 - Concern: The academy concept is narrowing too quickly
 - Aptitude and attitude (2) are more important than technical skills
 - Should look like small groups with lots of redundancy and ideas
 - There should be synergy between industry, business and schools to set expectations at an early age
 - Mentors should be used from industry and business
 - Curriculum relevance needs to be developed early and reinforced over time
 - Academies should be vehicles for interaction:
 - Interaction between schools
 - Disciplines
 - Students
 - They should coach for performance under time pressure

V. Parent Dialogue (survey)

Parent surveys were conducted on-line and through paper copy distribution. A total of 1,900 responses from parents of students currently enrolled in grades Pre-K through 12 responded to the survey: N= 1,542 for Dothan City Schools, N=287 for Houston County Schools, N= 76 for area private schools. Due to the very small sample return (N=5) from home-school parents, the Task Force will not attempt to summarize positions/opinions from that sector, although comments received from these parents are included in the raw data.

Parents were asked to identify the best and worst part of their children's education. In response to focus group suggestions, the survey provided a checklist of possible areas for consideration (checklists were the same for both questions) including: curriculum/programs, teachers and staff, counseling/advising, testing, student activities, athletics, parent involvements,

buildings and facilities. Parents also were given the option of selecting “other” for either question, and providing narrative input.

Given the perception problems facing Dothan City Schools (evidenced through the Envision community input process, et al), the Task Force was surprised to note the extreme similarities between response patterns for both the city and county schools. Both indicate that curriculum/programs and teachers and staff were strong points in their education systems. Both also indicate dissatisfaction with testing and with counseling/advising. (NOTE: based in part on Task Force research and upon the narrative comments by parents, dissatisfaction with counseling/advising is less reflective of the quality of these services and more indicative of the fact that counselors in area schools are not engaged in “counseling” activities. Neither students nor parents perceive counselors as professionals who can assist with academic problems, personal issues, and/or career or college selections. Counselor time is spent coordinating the over-burdensome testing program, maintaining records, and performing other similar extensions of administrative support.)

Student activities and athletics were positively rated in both public systems, although athletics was selected as a strength more frequently by Houston County than by Dothan City parents. Buildings and facilities were unfavorably rated by both public groups, with more negative responses in the County System.

The private school respondents rated the same four areas as for public schools (curriculum and programs, teachers and staff, student activities, and athletics) as strengths. However the percentage of respondents indicating that curriculum and programs was a “best” feature of their schools were significantly higher in the private sector--72% for the private schools; 50% for Dothan City Schools; 49% for Houston County Schools.

An area of obvious discrepancy between public and private sectors was “parental involvement.” Only 16% of Dothan City parents and 18% of Houston County parents rated involvement as one of the best features of their child’s education, compared to 42% of the private school respondents.

Dothan City Schools

Comments from Dothan City School parents included praise for the magnet schools (Carver and Montana St.), several going as far as to state that were it not for the magnet schools their children would be in private or county schools. A large number of parents (approximately 80) wrote that they had no problems or no problems at this time with their children’s education. These comments were highly clustered in the lower grades. Dothan City parents choosing to comment often cited discipline issues, concerns with testing and with the perception that No Child Left Behind is weakening the education process.

Some also indicated dissatisfaction that the magnet schools are not true “magnets” with regard to academic excellence and/or that similar expectations are not in place at all schools.

Admiration for teachers is obvious at the younger grade levels, however it begins to weaken in upper grades. (This parallels input from the high school students, see page 17.) The Task Force cannot ascertain if this is truly a difference in the teaching practices at higher grades or indicates that parents of older children are more likely to be involved in behavioral and/or achievement issues as their children enter pre-teens. However, taken in consideration with the statements by the high school students, there is either a real or perceptual problem with the level of caring/concern and/or competence of teachers in the upper grade levels.

Houston County Schools

Houston County School parents expressed many of the same concerns and possible solutions. (Note: the Task Force will reemphasize this point throughout this report to help insure that readers understand that the real or perceived problems affecting the City system are already clearly reflected in the County system.) Discipline and testing were major complaints of the County School parents. Athletic issues surfaced that did not appear in City School comments—specifically facilities problems and statements about favoritism toward athletes in the classroom/school. Several parents also indicated that they felt children were being rushed to learn in the classrooms. Like the City School respondents, some parents indicated their schools were “great” and that they were experiencing no problems. Several stated that they moved to the county so that their children could attend specific schools.

Private Schools

Private school parent comments (limited in number) centered around a clean and safe environment; fair discipline; no behavior issues (as offenders are expelled); and the ability to worship God and/or be exposed to a Christian-based curriculum. Several parents stated that attending private school was financially difficult and that they would prefer that their tax dollars be spent educating their children—either through government allocations to private schools or through substantial changes in the public school systems that would allow them to consider transfers for their children.

VI. High School Student Dialogue (post-it note activity)

The post-it note activity was widely publicized in the area, and will not be re-summarized here. (NOTE: details on the process can be found on the www.Envisiondothan.com website.) In early March 2007, every 9th – 12th grade

student in Dothan City Schools and Houston County Schools, along with participants from Houston Academy and Northside Methodist Academy, was given an opportunity to provide the Task Force with creative, innovative ideas to improve their education. The response was overwhelming, with over 7000 post-it notes received by and read by the Task Force. Students from Dothan High School assisted with the determination of categories in building an affinity diagram using the raw data. Categories were the same for both systems—activities; teachers and staff; consolidation (Dothan High and Northview High Schools); rules and discipline; dress code and ID's; hands on learning; scheduling; technology; facilities; curriculum and instructional strategies; classes; and lunch/food. The categories were determined by the preponderance of issues selected by the students, themselves. The absence of any category that a reader might consider to be important indicates only that the students did not share that opinion.

The Task Force noted, with pleasure, that the overwhelming number of concerns and suggestions were centered on curriculum, teaching strategies, and classes. In short—students were focused on what was occurring within the classrooms and what was impacting their academic education. This was true for both public systems and for the private school respondents. (NOTE: a large number of notes were received on the issue of lunch, lunchroom food, lunchroom environment, and lunchroom freedoms. The Task Force did not summarize these but will, instead, have the students address these issues directly during their forum.) Dothan City summaries are presented first.

Dothan City Schools

DCS students want more activities, specifically field trips related to their courses. There is a moderate call for more student input into school operation. (NOTE: evidence the volume of responses received for this exercise.) There were also ideas for different types of clubs and organizations than currently exist, but the degree to which these would be student-supported on any particular campus is not discernable. Students also appear to want more sports that are available for non-athletes, and a wider variety of sports activities (i.e. swimming.) What was clear to the Task Force was that students want to be asked for their opinions about the types of extra-curricular activities that could be offered as opposed to being offered what has traditionally be in place.

The issue of teachers and staff was the most troubling to the Task Force reviewers. Students, in large numbers, want teachers to be more involved and to interact more with their students in their classes. Students are asking for more communication with teachers and for less paperwork so that teachers have more time to spend with their charges. Students also see value in smaller class sizes that would allow more individual attention. They seem to be craving a different (read: closer) relationship with their teachers. However, while some students fault the system (paperwork, teaching out of field, etc.) for the teacher-student

gap, too many more lay the responsibility on the teachers. The Task Force noted that the same issues with regard to too much busywork and not enough individual instruction emerged in City and County post-it notes, the City students were much more specific about teachers not caring about their students. One student stated, "The teachers don't want to be here any more than we do." The Task Force would not single-out this comment were it not for the fact that it represents too many other similar statements. Whether the lack of concern (or in some cases, stated lack of competence) is real or perceived—the Dothan City Schools, with the champion teachers in the lead, need to address this issue head-on. If this is the perception of the students, carried home to the parents on a daily basis, the support for teachers expressed by parents of younger children will inevitably erode.

Students also site teachers for lecturing too much, giving busy work, not helping students, and being more concerned with dress codes and ID's than with student achievement. Several mentioned more concern with paychecks than with teaching. The Task Force discussed that some of this is likely due to a natural tendency of teenagers to rebel against authority figures. But what was prominent here, and was missing from the Houston County notes, was the large number of students who felt that their teachers did not love teaching, and/or did not like them (the students).

Administrators did not escape the same criticism, though few students used their post-it notes to write about administration or administrative issues. The counseling process/service was criticized for not being what students needed, but these statements dealt more with the work assigned to counselors than criticism of the counselors, per se.

On the issue of DHS & NHS consolidation, there were very few comments. (NOTE: the Task Force noted that this was true, also, for teachers and parents.) The few comments received were almost evenly split amongst pro-consolidation, anti-consolidation, and advocates for building a new school. But clearly, the issues on the minds of the students have little to do with the structure, organization, and physical location of their high school experience. They are focused on what is or is not (in their opinion) happening within the walls of the schools they attend now, and almost none is positing a new or different facility as a solution.

The dress code and the ID system were criticized, with students suggesting that they be given more freedom in both areas. It appeared to the Task Force that if these rules are necessary for student protection and/or to maintain an environment conducive to learning, that students were not aware of these reasons. Students (we think wisely) noted that having a student miss valuable class and instructional time for a dress code or ID infraction seemed counterproductive. On a very positive note, there were almost no statements

regarding concerns with safety and security while on school premises or participating in school activities.

Hundreds of post-it notes were received regarding hands on activities. These were distributed over several areas: in the form of field trips related to academic coursework, projects within the academic classes to foster interaction amongst students and between students and teachers, development of specific classes, more labs and science-based activities, and career development opportunities. The underlying message—students feel they are given too much book work and busy work, and they are bored.

In the area of scheduling, many students would like school to start later in the day, last fewer hours, and/or be conducted four days per week instead of five. The Task Force fully recognizes the difficulty in establishing schedules that either do not meet federal or state requirements or make the conduct of school (bus schedules, in loco parentis, etc...) impossible. However, combined with the many statements that students are bored, there may be creative solutions for shortening the amount of time that students at the upper-grade levels are actually on the high school campus. Many students also expressed a desire for longer breaks and longer lunches. This may reflect a need for more down-time, classroom boredom, a need for more student-student social interaction, all of these, or something else.

Technology requests were not as abundant in the City responses as they were in the County. Issues for DCS students dealt more with access (blockage of illegal sites.) The Task Force noted that one of the academies currently under consideration by the DCS administration and reflected by the employer workshop group was for IT—yet there did not seem to be a strong call for more or more advance IT classes in the City schools. This should be considered.

Students in the Dothan City Schools were more concerned with the number of students in their classes and the overall “look” of the classrooms than with the condition of the facilities. This does not indicate that they would not like to see changes. However, buildings and facilities are not a prominent concern. They would like more colorful classrooms/hallways, better or bigger desks, and cleaner bathrooms that are better stocked with essential items.

Students were extremely expressive with regard to curriculum and instruction. Many indicated that different learning styles were not being considered (asking for more visual aids)—this is in line with their statements regarding more active learning environments. They, like some of the parents, would like disruptive students omitted from their classes, and they again reiterated the request for smaller class sizes. The requests to make learning fun and to increase the number of Dothan Technical Center classes also were moderately reflected.

The category that garnered the most responses was identified by the Dothan High School student assistants as “Classes.” College prep, AP, career oriented, special classes (particularly foreign languages) and an overwhelming outcry for the arts---art, music, dance, theatre—were evident. Class environments that more closely parallel college courses and classes that are needed (for college, for careers, etc.) as opposed to electives that must be taken to meet credit requirements were cited. Textbooks (better quality and enough for every student) and more interactive counseling to select programs of study and courses also were featured comments.

Houston County Schools

Once again, the issues and possible solutions described by the Houston County School students parallel those in Dothan City Schools, with a couple of exceptions.

County students state a strong desire for field trips related to their programs. They want more clubs and teams, and are very specific about teams for soccer, track, swimming, and (to the surprise of the Task Force) ping pong. Their desire for more hands on learning parallels the DCS students, with requests both inside the academic classroom and for additional career-based course work. They want smaller class sizes, less busy work, and more individualized instruction and/or time with the teacher.

Dress codes (particularly the requirement to tuck in shirt tails) were issues that students would like to see re-addressed. A topic that was noted in the HCS responses and much less so in DCS---allowing tobacco products in school.

Counseling (the function, not the individuals) again was criticized for not providing students with information needed for future plans.

Art and music (along with dance, theatre, etc) are classes cited by County students as desired additions to their current programs. As with the City students, the Task Force determined that this demand was both curricular and developmental—students want the courses per se, but they also want an outlet for expression and a change from what is largely depicted as uninteresting class work. They want more input for themselves (and some, for their parents) into developing schedules. And they want more electives---foreign languages {other than Spanish}, AP courses, classes that provide college credit (dual enrollment). The Task Force also noted that requests for vocational classes in the County closely followed the courses with which these students were already familiar---agribusiness, small engines, cosmetology, etc... Overall, the request for more/greater access to vocational classes was stronger in the County system than in the City.

Houston County students, much more than their Dothan City School peers, called for study halls. Block scheduling also should be an issue for reconsideration according to these students. The perception that students have too much busy work and that students are doing “homework” in class is a clear indication that the longer block schedules are not being utilized as once envisioned by national educators. Students, again, want classes to start later in the day and be more interactive. They, too, want longer breaks and longer lunch periods (with more freedom to move around during these times.)

Laptop requests in the county far outpaced those of DCS respondents approximately 10:1. Students in Houston County voiced similar complaints about the blockage of internet sites and the availability of technology to do research and school projects. Technology, in general, was a major focus for students—not enough computers, inadequate (old) technology, insufficient access with regard to hours of operation and longer library hours.

Facilities in the County Schools were more of an issue than for City School respondents, particularly with regard to band rooms and athletic facilities. Once again, the stocking of bathrooms with appropriate items was a major concern. County students also indicated, in several subsections of the activity, that having younger children on the same campus as older students was less than desirable. This was also an issue cited on bus routes.

Private Schools

Comments from the private school students centered primarily on academics. Although several students stated a desire for more activities outside of the classroom, the recurring themes were for more AP classes and electives such as foreign languages, writing, study abroad, etc.. Again, the arts were requested, and several students noted a need for tutoring or other types of teacher assistance with subjects.

VII. High School Teacher Dialogue (post-it note activity)

As part of the post-it note activity for area high school students, teachers were asked to provide one innovative idea or suggestion to improve local education.

Dothan City teachers suggested, in summary: more/better technology, smaller classes, relief from paperwork and testing, and more flexibility for teachers (curriculum, dress, schedule, et al) were the more prominent issues. Separation of students who do vs. those who do not want to learn, and more challenges for advanced students also were cited. Several teachers indicated a desire for more career oriented courses or project-oriented classes to help

motivate students. (The Task Force noted that only one of the seventy-three teachers participating mentioned “career academies” .)

Houston County teachers suggested: smaller class sizes, more arts, more classes geared toward real life and/or career skills, more technology (smart boards, etc), more classes in a day and more choices of classes (languages, college prep) allowing students to leave campus for other activities once they have their high school credits, less testing, different pay structures for teachers, more funding for academic activities/trips, separating students by academic level/ability.

Only one private school faculty responded. His/Her suggestions included more electives (drama, writing, current events, languages), more time for teachers to help students, more activities outside the classroom, and more hands on activities.

VII. Recent High School Graduate Dialogue (survey) Summary

The Task Force acknowledges sadly that this part of the four-part Dialogue was not successful in terms of participation. Several personnel at the participating colleges worked hard to put Task Force members in touch with students. However, the strategies selected by the Task Force to engage recent grads (students who completed their high school education in a Dothan City or Houston County school within the last five years) were not effective. The Task Force is very willing to continue working with this cohort if the local school systems feel there is more to be learned at this point in the data gathering process.

From the few eligible responses collected to-date and two small focus groups (one at Wallace Community College and one at Troy University-Dothan Campus), the Task Force has heard the following:

- students may not have had enough access to information about college and careers, and would have liked more interaction with trained counselors;
- some students did not feel that they were prepared for the pace of college academics and/or for the comprehensive testing process (final exams encompassing all material delivered or covered during the term);
- students would like more information about and access to scholarships.

The small number of participants in the target group makes it impossible for the Task Force to draw any conclusions or make recommendations based upon these comments at this time.

IX. Summary

The Task Force has repeated two phrases over the last eight months of introspection and debate. The first, “establishing a community culture of high expectations.” We know this is easier said than done, as many of us speak of high expectations and then all too often seek exceptions when our own family members and friends are involved. But if the community is integrally involved in discussing, debating, and adopting these expectations, then it is more likely that everyone will adhere to them. This is a cultural shift that will take time, but it is the only way to insure that our education systems are permanently and positively changed.

The second statement is a corollary of the first, with more dire ramifications: “Failure is not an option.” The Task Force feels strongly that we do not have the luxury of putting in place new reforms or adaptations in the hope that they will succeed. Too many options have failed, and many others are on the road to failure once true data sets are available to measure their effects. We must assume that this is our best, and possibly last, opportunity to positively impact local education. On a community level, we must get it right. And on an individual level, we must establish a culture that expects success without diminishing the value of good-faith efforts. Adults fail, and our school children are adults-in-the-making. So it is not reasonable to expect them to succeed at everything all the time. And certainly for our youngest children, their failures are seldom their fault. They must not be stigmatized or stifled. But we still can set our expectations high, actively and effectively support and assist the children (and their families) when they fall short, intervene sensitively but soundly, be truthful in our assessments, reward effort, and replicate achievement. We must recognize and celebrate success and reject failure on both a community and an individual level if we are ever to achieve the goals envisioned in ENVISION.

IX. Acknowledgements

The Task Force wishes to thank the following individuals and organizations for their assistance with production, promotion, and tabulation of results from the Community-Wide Education Dialogue:

- Morgan Multimedia
- Ms. Susan Tatom, Dothan Area Chamber of Commerce
- Senior World Volunteers
- The Troy University-Dothan Campus
- Wallace Community College
- Troy State and Wallace Community College student leaders, and
- Activity Directors Kerrie Sheppard (WCC) and Amy Yelverton (TS-DC.)
- WTVY-TV News
- Student representatives from area high schools
- Student leaders from Dothan High School who assisted with the affinity diagramming process.

- And Local Media
 - WTVY-TV News
 - WDHN-TV News
 - WWNT Talk Radio
 - The Dothan Eagle
 - Rickey Stokes News
 - Prudential Showcase Realty and WRJM Radio

Thanks also are offered to the participating schools/systems—Dothan City Schools, Houston Academy, Houston County Schools, and Northside Methodist Academy.



ENVISION

Creating Meaningful Change in Our Community

EDUCATION TASK FORCE MEMBERSHIP

Mike Babb	Wallace Community College
Hamp Baxley	Ramsay, Baxley, and McDougal
Bob Boyle	Michelin Tire Corporation
Judy Bush	Air National Guard
Angie Casey	WTVY TV
Ann Cotton	Girls, Inc.
Rodney Davis	Troy University Dothan Campus
Willie Durr	Alabama Cooperative Extension System
Vince Edge	The Wiregrass Foundation
Curtis Harvey	Houston County Commission
Jin Ri Jiang	Dothan Leisure Services
Christina Johnson	C.I.T.Y. Program
Margaret Johnson	Dothan City Board of Education
Linda Kelley	Dothan Area Chamber of Commerce
Libby Krietemeyer	Education Foundation for Dothan's Future
Susan Loftin	Dothan City Schools
Maria Paredes	Sony Magnetic Products, Inc.
Susan Robertson	Wiregrass Museum of Art
Morris Slingluff	Slingluff United Insurance
Velma Tribue	State Farm Insurance
Susan Vierkandt	Prudential Showcase Properties
Barbara Ward	Vice President PTSO Northside Methodist Academy
Roy Watford	Houston County Schools
Barbara Alford	In Sight Solutions, LLC