Reimagining Education
The Albany-Dougherty County Education Collaborative
2014
December 2014

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A Long-Term Collaborative

Moving Forward in the Short Term
To the Dougherty County community and its supporters,

Thank you for allowing us to convene and discuss education in our community. With your unyielding support, it was during spring 2014 we began a series of meetings to share information and discuss ways to work together more effectively — the intent of which was to address issues of dropout and low educational attainment in Albany-Dougherty County.

We engaged the University of Georgia's J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development and Carl Vinson Institute of Government to facilitate conversations with educators, parents, students, citizens, and other stakeholders as well as to study the local issues. Our primary purpose was to gain a better understanding of the attitudes and perceptions of the PK-16 educational system and identify a definitive set of priorities that the community can address.

From the gathering of more than 400 voices from the Dougherty County community, we learned of real-life stories, experiences, insights, and suggestions as to how we can improve our condition and advance both educationally and economically. It is from this collective engagement we learned of a community's renewed commitment to education. We also learned that the residents understand that the area's economic vitality is dependent upon the increase and diverse educational attainment of the citizens in Albany and Dougherty County and that our county must aggressively take the steps to educate and empower a workforce equipped with necessary technical and life skills.

As we boldly move forward, our goal and next steps are to use the findings in this report to help guide future conversations. We hope that you will help us to widely share this report and that you continue to be engaged with us and the community at large to ensure that all voices are heard.

In the near very future, our desire is facilitate bringing together educators, business leaders, and other community leaders to begin the exploration of the findings and recommendations in this report to help move this process forward. It is critical that we examine the formation of a long-term collaborative process focused on changing the educational landscape and leading to a career and workforce-ready community.

At the onset of this effort we shared that our mission was not to simply improve retention and graduation rates, but to build a better community through the vehicle of education. We remain committed to that mission. However, the collective minds and hands of the entire Dougherty County community will be required in order to yield the harvest this area so richly deserves.

Again, we thank you for your vested interest and we look forward to experiencing and witnessing the rewarding benefits of this collective labor.

Dr. Art Dunning  
Interim President  
Albany State University  

Dr. Paul Jones  
Interim President  
Darton State College  

Dr. David Mosely  
Superintendent  
Dougherty County School System  

Dr. Anthony Parker  
President  
Albany Technical College
Executive Summary

In the past year, four educational leaders in Dougherty County began meeting to look for new ways to help students reach higher levels of achievement. The leaders — Dr. David Mosely, superintendent of the Dougherty County School System; Dr. Art Dunning, interim president of Albany State University; Dr. Anthony Parker, president of Albany Technical College; and Dr. Paul Jones, interim president of Darton State College — have since initiated a collaborative partnership to seek and implement strategies to boost student achievement in the PK-16 system, leverage resources, and provide a support system to impact graduation rates and increase enrollment in post-secondary education.

This summer, the University of Georgia's J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development and Carl Vinson Institute of Government were brought in to facilitate conversations with educators, parents, students, citizens, and other stakeholders as well as to study the local issues.

In addition to reviewing educational, socioeconomic, and demographic data about education in Albany-Dougherty County, the UGA team held an Education Summit, focus groups, stakeholder interviews, and listening sessions to find out what community members thought about the issues that affect student educational achievement. Overall, close to 400 individuals provided comments and suggestions.

WHAT WE LEARNED

As we listened and talked with community members, we found they clearly understand the critical role education plays in the community’s success. Citizens view improved educational outcomes as key to change and economic prosperity. Several major themes emerged from these conversations:

• Residents welcome renewed commitment to education by the school system and community. Across all groups, teachers, principals and other school personnel were mentioned as providing good instruction and support. Community participants pointed to the impressive turnout at the Education Summit and the parent-community listening sessions as indicative of commitment and desire for continued change. They appreciated being asked for feedback and want to provide input as decisions are made. Additionally, the community is encouraged by the collaborative work of the school superintendent and the presidents of the three higher education institutions. Across all groups, the consensus was that these leaders are providing excellent leadership and are working collaboratively to address improved student educational achievement.

• Community members noted that for sustained community change to occur social and environmental factors have to be accounted for and addressed. These include poverty, family disengagement, drug usage, teen pregnancy, racism, insufficient school resources, and teacher support. Some community members noted a long-standing division along racial and economic lines and spoke of the community as divided into “two Albany’s.” Others said that some students come to school unprepared to learn; they enter the school system with unmet developmental, emotional, physical and medical needs. As a result the school system, specifically teachers, must spend time dealing with non-academic issues.
• The community called for increased investment in the PK-12 system. Many noted that budget constraints have negatively affected teaching, class size, student safety, availability of textbooks and technology, and afterschool support. They expressed a need for well trained teachers and counselors who provide support and encouragement, additional instructional staff, a rigorous curriculum with research-based and proven strategies, and technology (such as Wi-Fi) that works.

• Participants want to strengthen the support environment for students to ensure their success. This includes opportunities for students to both stay in school and re-enter school after an interruption, a stronger transition from middle school to high school, and high school programs that mix classroom time with real life work experience. In addition, they noted a need to foster parental involvement including knowledge of how the school system operates, resources that are available to them and their child, and timely information on high school graduation requirements and postsecondary options, inclusive of scholarships.

• An educated workforce benefits everyone. Low educational attainment and perception of a low-skilled workforce negatively affects the county’s opportunities for economic growth. Providing supportive pathways for high school completion and beyond, such as the Performance Learning Center, and increasing school-to-work opportunities and experiences with local companies were mentioned as ways to provide students with experiences that reinforce the importance of education and work skills.

• Positive media coverage matters. Across all groups, local media coverage was noted as an issue that needed increased attention. Many participants expressed discontent with the media coverage and stated that, at times, the media helped perpetuate a negative image of the school system. They felt this negative perception contributed to families leaving the school system or the county altogether. Participants spoke of the need to build a stronger education-media relationship.

• Coordination and partnerships make a difference. The need for better coordination, new collaborations and stronger partnerships was a recurring theme mentioned in some form across all groups. Participants noted that competition and territorialism exists throughout the county and leads to mistrust, miscommunication, and duplication of efforts. Participants called for better coordination in the nonprofit sector, between the schools and the nonprofit/faith-based community, and between the school system and county officials.

Additionally, faculty, staff, and administrators from the three higher education institutions spoke of the need to better coordinate and align their work and marketing efforts. Examples of effective partnerships were:

• The articulation agreement and coursework alignment between Albany Technical College and Albany State University that allows students to obtain an Associate of Applied Science degree in Fire Science Technology at Albany Technical College and then complete a Bachelor’s degree in Fire Services Administration at Albany State, and
• The Performance Learning Center (PLC) — a partnership of Communities in Schools, Albany Technical College, and the Dougherty County School System that was created to help improve high school graduation rates, allowing students to earn college credit at Albany Technical College and prepare for a career.
CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Listening to the voices of the Albany-Dougherty County community provided information and real-life stories supported by county and state data. While the data told us “how many” and provided insight into trends, the listening sessions, focus groups, and interviews provided insights into the life experiences and everyday challenges of students and parents. Through this process we arrived at three major conclusions:

1. Educators, adults and other support systems matter in every grade and all the time,
2. The economic vitality of the community depends on increasing the overall educational attainment of its citizens, and
3. The county must lead with an educated workforce that is ready with both technical and life skills.

Our recommendations, based on the findings and conclusions drawn from the community assessment, provide actions to increase Albany-Dougherty County outcomes.

A long-term collaborative strategy

While some issues are school system and post-secondary institution specific, many of the issues and challenges are long-standing and embedded in social and economic factors. Changing the educational landscape of the county is not only a long-term effort, it is also one that participants acknowledged as starting long before a child reaches school-age. A birth to adulthood educational collaborative requires a commitment of decades. Such an effort cannot be moved forward by any single institution alone but requires the shared commitment of each institution and sector as key collaborators.

Such an undertaking also requires dedicated personnel and the financial support of grantors and contributors. As initial steps, the UGA team recommends identifying resources to create an entity to focus on the formation of a community process to work collectively and across sectors to define what economic vitality means for Dougherty County and establish goals to increase educational attainment and economic self-sufficiency. As part of the process, we recommend creating a multi-sector, collaborative work group to map out a preliminary work plan and determine initial steps.

Moving forward in the short term

Additionally, there are several strategies that merit exploration over the next few months. These can begin as initiatives that are incorporated into the longer term collaborative in the future.

1. Work with school personnel and area nonprofits to establish a process for the early identification of PK-12 student and teacher needs that is aligned and shared with local nonprofits, the Albany Chamber, businesses, and the three higher education institutions.
2. Invest in school district and postsecondary joint marketing strategies that illustrate different pathways to a postsecondary education and a four-year college degree.
3. Through existing school system avenues, provide leadership skills training to parents, guardians and community members who can provide input for system improvement.
4. Explore the feasibility of creating a 9th grade academy to help with middle school to high school transition. Track student progress and system learnings.
5. Meet with area business and education leaders to explore how to increase high school to college options and high school-to-work readiness. Explore the possibility of a College to Career Academy.
6. Bring together faculty from the three higher education institutions to discuss how their institutions can jointly contribute to the economic vitality of the community. Issues to consider: how to align educational standards, map coursework and work with school system teachers and staff for increased student academic preparation.
7. Explore ways to create or reinstate early identification programs to help students enter school prepared to learn, and in later grades provide accessible points of school re-entry for those who interrupted their schooling due to personal or academic issues.
Introduction

In the past year, four educational leaders in Albany-Dougherty County began meeting to look for new ways to help students reach higher levels of achievement. The leaders — Dr. David Mosely, superintendent of the Dougherty County School System; Dr. Art Dunning, interim president of Albany State University; Dr. Anthony Parker, president of Albany Technical College; and Dr. Paul Jones, interim president of Darton State College — have since initiated a collaborative partnership to seek strategies to boost student achievement in the PK-16 system, leverage resources, and provide a support system to impact graduation rates and increase enrollment in post-secondary education.

Several factors led these leaders to initiate this first-time collaboration of higher education and the public school system to address local education issues. These include:

• Several years ago the Georgia Department of Education realigned graduation reporting to be consistent with national reporting norms. The new measurements allow comparison of schools, districts, and states. This change went hand-in-hand with national and state level efforts to raise the graduation rates in the United States. The new statistics showed that graduation rates for the county were much lower than anticipated. But it also started a dialog to address the issue.

• The nationwide economic downturn and loss of some employers in the county have also caused leaders to turn their attention to ways to create a more skilled labor force in the region. In this effort, educational attainment is key. An educated workforce is a critical component for economic vitality in the county.

• The goals coincide with Governor Nathan Deal’s “Complete College Georgia” plan to add an additional 250,000 postsecondary graduates to the state’s rolls by 2020 so that the state has a more educated workforce. The University System of Georgia (USG) and the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) are working to address this critical need.

The community faces challenges of poverty, employment, and educational attainment. But it also has many assets — three institutions of higher education; dedicated school system teachers and administrators; more than 50 community and social service agencies; and leaders committed to working for a positive future.

The University of Georgia’s J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development and Carl Vinson Institute of Government were brought in to facilitate conversations with educators, parents, students, citizens, and other stakeholders as well as to study the local issues. Their findings are presented here and will help guide the next steps in the process.

We will develop a process that serves our community’s need for wealth creation and economic development. The collaborative will be a transforming agent in Southwest Georgia.

—Anthony O. Parker, President of Albany Technical College
In addition to reviewing statistics and reports about education in Albany-Dougherty County, faculty from the University of Georgia (J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development and Carl Vinson Institute of Government) collected data using the following methods:

- An **education summit** was held to find out what community members think about education and educational issues. More than 140 people attended the session.
- Seven **focus groups** provided additional insight from 53 community stakeholders including:
  - Members of the Dougherty County School Board,
  - Principals and assistant principals,
  - Faculty, staff, and administrators from each of the area institutions for higher education (three focus groups),
  - Business and Chamber of Commerce representatives, and
  - Nonprofit professionals.
- **Stakeholder interviews** included elected officials, and corporate and nonprofit leaders.
- Listening sessions were held with **parents and community members**; 117 people attended.
- **High school students** (63) participated in student listening sessions.
- **Data review** included examining educational, socioeconomic, and demographic data for the county. Sources included the Georgia Department of Education, Kids Count, the U.S. Census Bureau, and the Georgia Department of Labor

More in-depth descriptions of each method used follows.

**Education Summit**

More than 140 Dougherty County residents discussed the county’s PK-16 education system during an Education Summit held on July 1, 2014. More than 2,000 individual comments offered by participants were analyzed to uncover underlying themes.

Participants identified the forces, factors, and trends that positively impact PK-16 education, and the specific assets that the community can build on to affect positive change. In addition, they identified the forces, factors, and trends that may inhibit or restrain educational achievement.

The responses revealed a range of views held by participants. Some think that communication and collaboration within the community is strong, while others see territorialism and lack of cooperation.

**Focus Groups**

To gather more in-depth information on the issues affecting education in Albany-Dougherty County and obtain input to help shape the direction of the education collaborative, focus groups explored ideas for strengthening education.

In total, 53 individuals participated in seven different focus group discussions facilitated by UGA faculty on July 16-17, 2014. The participants were representatives of:

- Dougherty County School Board;
- Dougherty County School Principals and Assistant Principals;
- Nonprofit organizations;
- Albany Chamber members and business people;
- Albany State University faculty, staff and administrators;
- Albany Technical College faculty, staff and administrators; and
- Darton State College faculty, staff and administrators.

Focus group questions differed slightly by group. However, questions that helped identify existing and potential partnerships and collaborations were asked across all groups. Several findings were common to
all seven groups while some findings were specific to one or more focus groups. All findings are considered here. When additional information is needed to better understand the context of the comments, findings are noted by group.

The intent of the focus groups was to better understand risk factors that contribute to low student achievement and to examine and uncover institutional, organizational, and community assets that could be built on for the betterment of education in the county. To that end, a careful examination of existing and promising resources, programs, and initiatives, both internal and external to Albany-Dougherty County, were key to this assessment.

**Youth Views**

Using computers to input responses, 63 students from the area’s four high schools shared their responses to four questions:

1. What do you like about your school?
2. Thinking about you and your peer group, what barriers or issues affect your ability to graduate and achieve success beyond high school? (military, technical school, college)
3. How can the education system (school board, PK-12 and higher education institutions) help to remove these barriers/issues?
4. What can you, as students, do to address these barriers/issues and achieve success?

The listening session was hosted on August 27, 2014, at the Board of Education and facilitated by faculty from the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development. Students first discussed their thoughts in small groups and then shared discussions with the entire group while facilitators recorded their feedback.

**Parents Listening Sessions**

More than 100 parents and community members gathered on August 26, 2014 at Monroe Comprehensive High School in Albany, Georgia, to share their thoughts and feedback on the education system in Albany-Dougherty County. The session was facilitated by the J.W. Fanning Institute for Leadership Development.

Participants worked in groups of six to eight people and responded to four questions:

1. As parents and community members, what are your top priorities for students of the PK-16 education system in Albany Dougherty County?
2. What barriers or issues are you aware of that affect students’ ability to graduate high school and move on to some form of post-secondary education?
3. How can the education system (school board, PK-12 and higher education institutions) help to remove these barriers/issues?
4. What can you, as parents and community members, do to address these issues?

Responses were input using computers and were projected in real time for everyone to see. In addition, participants were given paper to write any additional comments and those notes were recorded as well. This report summarizes all the data from the computer input as well as the handwritten notes.

**Stakeholder Interviews**

Interviews with key stakeholders in the county were used to inform recommendations for moving the educational collaborative forward. These interviews were conducted by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government.

Stakeholders represented a diverse group and included elected officials and leaders in the nonprofit, healthcare, military, and corporate sectors. Overall, interviewees were encouraged by the development of the collaboration and the participation in the education summit. They also showed willingness to support the collaborative effort.

**Statistics and Demographic Data**

Data for the county and the school system were reviewed from a variety of sources including:

- The U.S. Census Bureau;
- Kids Count;
- The Georgia Department of Education;
- The Georgia Department of Labor;
- The Federal Reserve;
- The Brookings Institute; and
- A variety of reports.
Addressing the issue of academic achievement for Dougherty County’s youth will directly benefit both individuals and the community as a whole. Educational attainment affects nearly every aspect of an individual’s life — employment, income, housing, health, life outcome, and even life expectancy. And its effect lasts for generations.

Beyond the individual, educational attainment impacts a community’s economic vitality. Low educational attainment and perception of a low-skilled workforce negatively affects the area’s opportunities for future economic growth.

Educational attainment can increase economic self-sufficiency and assets available to families, serves as a powerful long-term strategy for economic development, and can radically improve the life course of an entire generation of young people.

Participants clearly understand the critical role education plays in the success of the community. They view improved educational outcomes as key to change and economic prosperity.

They are encouraged by the school system and community’s renewed commitment to education. As evidence of positive change, they pointed to improved graduation rates\(^1\) and test scores, the emphasis on curriculum, programs such as Increased Learning Time (ILT), and mentoring programs. Across all groups, teachers, principals and other school personnel were mentioned as providing good instruction and support. Many pointed to the impressive turnout for the Education Summit and the parent/community listening sessions as indicative of commitment and desire for continued change.

Additionally, the community is encouraged by the collaborative work of the school superintendent and the presidents of the three higher education institutions. Across all groups, the consensus was that Dr. David Mosely, DCSS Superintendent, Dr. Art Dunning, interim president of Albany State University, Dr. Anthony Parker, president of Albany Technical College, and Dr. Paul Jones, interim president of Darton State College, are providing excellent leadership and working collaboratively to address student achievement. Assessment participants pointed to the educational leaders’ willingness to hold community, student and parent listening sessions, and the numerous cross-institutional work sessions as evidence of change and commitment. The leadership’s willingness to engage in dialogue with the community to learn about and further understand the many factors that affect student achievement, and find additional ways to help students and families achieve was viewed as positive and long overdue.

Additionally, participants wanted ways to celebrate community achievements and to show community pride. Across all groups, participants voiced the importance of an inclusive process where everyone would be invited to participate.

Student academic achievement is impacted by factors that include poverty, family disengagement, drug usage, teen pregnancy, racism, and insufficient school resources and teacher support. Some of these factors are long standing, contribute to student

\(^1\) Dougherty County’s 2012-2013 graduation rate was 60.10%, a slight increase from the 2011-2012 rate of 56.72%. Source: Governor’s Office of Student Achievement
apathy and limit opportunities for high school graduation and a post-secondary education.

The community noted a long-standing division along racial and economic lines and spoke of the community as divided into “two Albans.” This latter perception was reinforced by the student group, one student commented, “the community has the perception of students based on [geographic] location, so depending on the school stakeholders already perceive that students can’t achieve.”

Participant views on the relationship between student and school personnel, specifically teachers and counselors were mixed. Some in the county believed teachers provided a positive learning environment and strong support to students, while others believed that some teachers were teaching to a test and not providing a rigorous learning environment. There was general agreement that, at times, teachers must deal with disruptive behaviors and most classrooms need a teacher assistant to work with students who may be falling behind.

The student group called for more time with counselors, more resources such as computers and textbooks, and more information on college and scholarships. Finally, it is significant to note that the student group felt there was a lack of recognition of student effort, both of those students that have always achieved academically and done well, and of those students that have overcome difficulties and are making a concentrated effort.

Focus group respondents noted that students come to the classroom unprepared to learn. Some students enter the school system with unmet developmental, emotional, physical and medical needs. As a result the school system, specifically the teachers, must spend time dealing with non-academic issues. One focus group noted that the Dougherty County School System had three social workers for a 16,000 student system. They, and other participants, called for more trained social workers and a more coordinated system between the school system and other governmental and nonprofit support services.

Finally, opportunities for students to both stay in school and re-enter school after an interruption was cited as a need. One focus group stated a 9th grade academy was needed to ensure a stronger transition from middle school to high school, while the business focus group mentioned a need for a program like one in Carroll County, Georgia (Southwire 12-for-Life) that mixed classroom time with real life work experience. The student group verbalized that students “dropped out” for varying reasons (to care for younger siblings, to work, due to drug problems, or teenage pregnancy) and supported the idea, also expressed by others in the community, that the educational system needed to have supportive re-entry points and programs for students who dropped out of school or interrupted their education. These programs would be most effective when they kept in mind the reason the student dropped out or interrupted his schooling in the first place. For example, a student that leaves school for health reasons may not have the same concerns as a student that leaves due to financial issues or because of regretful behavior.

Dougherty County citizens widely acknowledged the critical role of parents in student achievement. Parental involvement in their child’s school, at all grade levels, makes a huge difference in what students pay attention to, how they interact with their teachers and peers, and the amount of effort they place on their school work. Assessment participants noted that what gets reinforced at home is key. They also noted that some students lack support at home due to absent parent(s),

An increased investment in system-wide education is needed

Parental and community knowledge and support cannot be underestimated

The community called for an increased investment in the PK-12 system. Many noted that budget constraints have negatively affected teaching, class size, availability of textbooks and technology, and afterschool support. They expressed a need for well trained teachers and counselors who provide support and encouragement, additional instructional staff, a rigorous curriculum with research-based and proven strategies, and technology (such as Wi-Fi) that works.
uneducated parents, or parents with substance abuse problems. Lack of knowledge of how the school system operates, resources that are available to them and their child, and constraints due to parent work schedules also contribute to lower levels of family support.

The parent-community listening session explored ways to keep parents better informed by strengthening the parent-education relationship, and using a texting system to inform parents on announcements and upcoming meetings. Parents also called for timely information on high school graduation requirements, postsecondary options, and financial aid. For many parents, the idea of college for their child comes with the worry that they do not have the resources to provide an education beyond high school.

It is important to note that Albany-Dougherty County has a rich resource in the nonprofit and faith-based community. Many of these organizations have programs that help students and parents learn about postsecondary options. The higher education institutions also have programs aimed at increasing student and parent postsecondary knowledge and options.

An educated workforce benefits everyone

Low educational attainment and perception of a low-skilled workforce negatively affects the county’s opportunities for economic growth. Providing supportive pathways for high school completion and beyond, such as the Performance Learning Center, and increasing school to work opportunities and experiences with local companies such as the College to Career Academy were mentioned as ways to provide students with experiences that reinforced the importance of education and work skills.

The county’s business community was noted as having a strong interest and commitment to supporting education and developing an educated workforce. The Economic Development Commission and the Albany Chamber of Commerce were mentioned as key partners in PK-12 system efforts. An example was the DCSS Partners in Excellence Program where business and community organizations help students through mentoring, tutoring, and real-life skills development.

Participants also mentioned that several other programs are working well and should be expanded; two noted were the Marine Corps Logistics Base mentoring program and the partnership between the schools and the hospital for clinical training and nursing practicums.

Positive local media coverage matters

Across all groups, local media coverage was noted as an issue that needed increased attention. Many participants expressed discontent with the media coverage and stated that, at times, the media helped
perpetuate a negative image of the school system. They felt this negative perception contributed to families leaving the school system or the county altogether. Participants spoke of the need to build a stronger education-media relationship.

**Coordination and partnerships make a difference**

The increased need for better coordination, new collaborations and stronger partnerships was a recurring theme mentioned in some form across all groups. Participants noted that competition and territorialism exists throughout the county and leads to mistrust, miscommunication, and duplication of efforts. Several participants called for a better working relationship between the school system, and city and county officials. Others mentioned the need for better coordination among the nonprofit sector and between the schools and the nonprofit/faith-based community. Several noted that this lack of coordination is disruptive to the schools and because there is little coordination, schools and students feel overwhelmed.

The faculty, staff, and administrators of the three higher education institutions spoke of the need to better coordinate and align their work. For example, they spoke of the need to align educational standards, map coursework across institutions, and conduct joint training for staff and faculty. They also mentioned the need to have increased knowledge of the excellent programs provided by the three institutions and the need for them to be supportive of each other’s efforts and achievements. As an example of an effective partnership, one group cited the articulation agreement and coursework alignment between Albany Technical College and Albany State University that allows students to obtain an Associate of Applied Science degree in Fire Science Technology at Albany Technical College and then complete a bachelor’s degree in Fire Services Administration at Albany State.

Several groups cited the Performance Learning Center (PLC), housed adjacent to Monroe Comprehensive High School as a community asset. PLC is a partnership of Communities in Schools, Albany Technical College and the Dougherty County School System and is designed to help improve high school graduation rates while allowing students to earn college credit at Albany Technical College and prepare for a career.

Additionally, higher education faculty and administrators spoke of the need to coordinate the message conveyed to students and parents on postsecondary education. They noted there were different pathways to a four-year degree and that this message needed to be jointly developed by the education institutions and made known to the entire community.

Overall, the Dougherty County community called for an inclusive, coordinated process where all segments of the community are invited to participate. One group mentioned the need for honest discussion and follow through on the findings from this report. The students and parents, the county leadership, the educational leaders, the faculty and staff of the higher education institutions, and the businesses and nonprofits all stated to be ready to engage in next steps.
Dougherty County Data

Why Increasing Educational Attainment Matters in Albany-Dougherty County

• The under-18 poverty rate is 44.9% for Albany-Dougherty County.
• Children growing up in poverty have an increased likelihood of being poor as adults. Nationwide, 42% of children in the bottom fifth of income distribution remain in the bottom as adults.
• Dougherty County School System has a 4-year (on-time) graduation rate of 60.1%, lagging behind the Georgia (71.5%) and national average (80%).
• Nationwide, a worker with a bachelor’s degree will out earn someone with a high school diploma by $850,000 over a lifetime.

o In Albany-Dougherty County someone with a high school diploma earns $6,514 more a year than someone with less education, a $260,560 difference over a 40-year career.

o In Albany-Dougherty County, a person with a bachelor’s degree is 10 times less likely to be unemployed than a person who did not graduate from high school and earns $22,868 more per year, a $914,720 difference over a 40-year career.

About Dougherty County

Dougherty County has a population of about 93,000 people, 82 percent live in the City of Albany — the state’s 8th largest city. The county was founded along

Education Impacts Unemployment and Median Earnings in Albany, Dougherty County, Georgia

<table>
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<th>Unemployment by Education</th>
<th>Median Earnings by Education</th>
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<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
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<tr>
<td>High school graduate or GED</td>
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<td>Some college or associate’s degree</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: unemployment data for graduate or professional degree is included in bachelor’s degree data
the Flint River in the early 1800s. Today, the eastern and southern region predominantly consists of poor minority residents while the northern and western part of the county is mostly white and more affluent (Federal Reserve and Brookings Institute, 2008).

In the 1990s, the City of Albany lost about 2 percent of its population while the Albany MSA grew by about 8 percent. The county is a mix of urban and rural areas.

Dougherty County has a young population with more than half of the residents under 31 years old, which is younger than the Georgia median age. It is also characterized by low median income. In 2012, the estimated median household income was $28,871, which is less than the median in 2000 and considerably less than the Georgia median income of $47,209.

In short, Albany-Dougherty County can be characterized as having (Source: U.S. Census Bureau):

- Median household income below state average.
- Unemployment percentage above state average.
- Median age significantly below state average.
- Renting percentage above state average.
- Length of stay since moving in significantly above state average.
- Housing is older than the state average.

In Dougherty County, educational attainment for nearly half of the adults age 25 to 64 is high school or less.

Education in Albany-Dougherty County

Among the many measures that serve as barometers for student achievement, graduation is one that predicts the likelihood that young people will enjoy a decent standard of living in the future, particularly by making post-secondary education an option. The gap between earnings for someone with no higher education and an individual with at least some college continues to widen.

Nationwide, the high school graduation rate for all students is 80 percent and in Georgia it is 70 percent. The numbers in Georgia for economically disadvantaged students slip to 61 percent and for black not Hispanic students to 62 percent. Dougherty County lags behind all these state averages for graduation rate. In fact, Dougherty County ranks 146 out of 157 school districts for percentage of students who graduate from high school on time.

Participants in the data gathering phase of this project mentioned that there needs to be more focus on early education. The data shows that, in fact, Albany-Dougherty County is doing better than the state average in early education for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Educational attainment in Dougherty County for adults age 25 to 64 is lower than the Georgia and national average.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational attainment for adults age 25 to 64 (2012)</th>
<th>Albany-Dougherty County</th>
<th>Georgia</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 12th grade</td>
<td>20.70 %</td>
<td>15.0 %</td>
<td>11.99 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or GED</td>
<td>28.90 %</td>
<td>28.3 %</td>
<td>26.61 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college or associate's degree</td>
<td>32.30 %</td>
<td>28.5 %</td>
<td>30.78 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>10.5 %</td>
<td>17.8 %</td>
<td>19.57 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate or professional degree</td>
<td>7.6 %</td>
<td>10.4 %</td>
<td>11.06 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
as well as enrollment in Georgia’s pre-K program. Since 2008, around 70% of children from low income families have enrolled in the pre-K program compared to the state average of 53-58% during that time period.

While there is a strong link between low-income and low-academic performance, research shows that is a link that can be broken. Among non-low income students, 40 states are above the national average graduation rate of 80 percent. However, among low-income students, 41 states are below the national average. The good news is states with narrow achievement gaps between low-income and non-low income students appear to be those with the most robust interventions in place to counteract the effects of poverty.

**Socioeconomic Factors**

Unemployment and poverty are issues that impact student achievement. The county’s unemployment rate is considerably higher than the state average. And not surprisingly, unemployment is highest for those with the least amount of education. Nationally, an individual with less than a high school education is three times more likely to be unemployed than someone with a bachelor’s degree. That effect is more pronounced in Albany-Dougherty County, where an individual with less than a high school education is TEN times more likely to be unemployed.

In a similar fashion, the median earnings are tied to educational levels — higher education translates into higher earnings. This is also the case in Albany-Dougherty County. However, when median earnings by gender are considered, there is a large gap between what men earn and women earn at the same educational attainment level. In a county with nearly half of the children living in poverty and more than 60 percent living in a single parent household usually headed by a woman (51%), the impact of low earnings is significant.

Other data that affect educational attainment and workforce readiness are noted below:

- 82.3% of students in Dougherty County are eligible to receive free and reduced price meals at school; the state average is 59.7%.
- Dougherty County has the fifth highest rate of children living with a single parent in the state.
- More than 46% of children in the county are living in poverty, compared to the state average of 27.3%

More than 140 Dougherty County residents discussed the state of education during an Education Summit held on July 1, 2014. They identified the forces, factors and trends that both positively and negatively impact PK-16 education in the county. More than 2,000 individual comments were analyzed to uncover underlying themes.

Participants also identified specific assets that the community can build on to affect positive change. These questions yielded responses that were closely related, as positive forces, factors, and trends often have within them specific assets upon which to build.

Summit participants expressed a number of differing view: while some participants saw great communication and collaboration within the community, others saw territorialism and lack of cooperation. All perceptions are valid, deserve examination, and are noted.

Many participants considered improved educational outcomes as the key to change and prosperity.

Major findings for the Education Summit are summarized by re-occurring themes and ideas.

» There is a strong commitment to quality education in the community.

Participants said there were good leaders and people in the community and an education system dedicated to ensuring that students engage in learning, achieving, graduating, and being prepared for post-secondary education or entry into the workforce. They viewed rising graduation rates, improved test scores, emphasis on good curriculum, and increased student involvement as indicators of this commitment.

Participants want to continue and build on this renewed energy and commitment. The summit itself inspired participants to think about how to engage the existing assets, including the “leaders in room,” local business and industry, the three higher education institutions, the abundance of educators, the marine base, the hospital, nonprofits, and the faith community. Gathering input and feedback from diverse segments of the community, inclusive of students and parents, was noted as extremely important.

Despite the strong sense of commitment to quality education, many believe that some students do not take ownership of their education, noting student apathy, lack of motivation, and disinterest. Graduation is not viewed as some students’ priority, especially if they take part in risky behaviors, such as drugs and unprotected sex. Participants believed that for some students and their families, giving up on school was acceptable, especially when it became difficult. High dropout rates, truancy, and chronic absenteeism were noted as behaviors that supported their view.

Adding to the perception of low educational standards, some participants believe that there is little consistency in the curriculum and that the changing state standards contribute to the low overall quality of education. Students are unprepared for higher education due to what some consider a poorly designed curriculum, inconsistent teaching, and lack of information about the requirements and rigor of a post-secondary education.
The community has strong leadership and is open to change.

Many participants viewed openness to change and strong community leadership as positive driving forces. They cited the community’s willingness to do whatever it takes to improve educational outcomes and many expressed that they were fortunate to have the present leadership in place. In particular, the new superintendent was identified as a strong, decisive leader, and the support of the school board was also mentioned. The commitment and collaborative leadership of the three higher education presidents was viewed as a particular strength. The relationship of the four educational leaders — DCSS, Darton State College, Albany Technical College and Albany State University — gave participants hope that a strong educational collaboration could be built and sustained. Some participants also believe that the front-line providers of education (teachers) are qualified, caring, and capable. The administration that manages the teachers and staff were also seen as dedicated and qualified to ensure that students receive a good education.

On the other hand, some participants reported a lack of consistent and accountable leadership. Participants believe that educational decision-making processes do not include all relevant stakeholders, and all too often cut out those “in the trenches” with firsthand experience. Participants want the school leadership to be actively seeking feedback from parents, students, teachers, staff, and community members when making major decisions.

Within schools, class size was seen as too large and classroom disciplinary practices lacking consistency and effectiveness. Education Summit participants said that teachers constantly need to focus on behavior that detracts from class time and quality instruction. A few said that teachers are not invested in the success of their students. There is a belief that some teachers are teaching to the test, rather than teaching critical thinking skills and to “the whole child.” Some reported that teacher quality suffers from a lack of training, mentors, and competition within the field.

The three higher education institutions deliver quality instruction and programs.

Albany-Dougherty County is both unique and fortunate to have quality institutions that offer strong programs that local students can attend. The many options and the willingness of these institutions to be part of the fabric of the community are well recognized. In fact, it is not just the presence of the higher education institutions that participants see as a positive factor, but also their willingness to deliver programs to: (1) help increase student achievement, and (2) assist student transition from high school to higher education and the workforce. Participants commented on the need to further develop and build programs that produce graduates ready for college and prepared for the workforce and available jobs. In particular they noted high school-to-college and high school-to-work transition programs such as dual enrollment programs and internships.

School and community programs and resources are positive factors.

Participants noted additional assets. Among these were programs for afterschool, early education
and pre-K, mentoring, workforce development and technical training, and programs for students with disabilities. Recognizing the contributions of programs and resources that are outside the typical school day, participants made suggestions to further build on those that have been proven successful. For example, they voiced a need for one-on-one mentor-type relationships between high school and college students, and for expanded mentorship programs between students and members of the business community.

» Budget constraints and limited funding.

Budget constraints and lack of funding limit the ability to expand programming and service provision, both within schools and for extracurricular activities. Funding cuts have affected class size, foreign language programs, the availability of textbooks and supplies, social services in the school system, and resources for students with mental health issues. Some perceive that the community lacks the fiscal resources necessary to develop effective extracurricular programs for students, such as mentorship and afterschool programs.

Finally, participants report that some existing programs were not piloted before implementation, and they are not being evaluated thoroughly enough to gather evidence on what does or does not work to inform future efforts.

» Albany-Dougherty County has good infrastructure and facilities.

Specific infrastructure and facilities including the libraries, the art museum, the Civil Rights Institute, Chehaw Park, and the RiverQuarium were viewed as positive factors in the community. Some believe that these institutions and resources are education tools that are either not being used or are currently underutilized. Participants also cited several community attributes and benefits that were not directly related to education. For example, participants view being the seat of the region and the overall quality of life as advantages. Another asset is the presence of volunteers and non-profit organizations. The healthcare system and the overall health of citizens were noted as positive factors as well.

» Parents and families have a critical role and need support.

Another major theme was the critical role of parents and the need to support families. A few noted that there is good parent-school communication and strong family involvement. Additionally, a texting service was recommended as a way to inform and engage families. Suggestions on how to further engage parents included increasing and strengthening the parent-educator collaboration, training, and clarification of the role of school system’s parent facilitators.
More frequently, participants cited a lack of parental involvement and insufficient educational reinforcement in the home as barriers to educational attainment. Absent parent(s), uneducated parents, parents with substance abuse problems, and a lack of family structure were factors participants mentioned that contribute to low educational expectations and low parental expectations. Participants also believe that parents, and subsequently their children, fail to recognize the benefits of education and often do not take advantage of available resources.

» High poverty, high unemployment and racial tension inhibit achievement.

Participants pointed to high poverty, high unemployment and racial tension as factors that restrain or inhibit educational achievement. These issues were viewed as limiting the resources available for schools and extracurricular programs and leading to higher rates of crime, homelessness, and poor health across the community. Racial tension and economic divisions throughout the community were viewed as issues that needed to be addressed by the Albany-Dougherty County leadership.

» Partnerships and collaborations matter.

The willingness to collaborate, communicate, and partner are critical in ensuring that the community as a whole is moving in the same direction. However, not all participants believe there is a strong collaborative culture in Albany-Dougherty County. Some mentioned the need for the PK-16 system to better coordinate programs and collaborate for sustained success. They noted that competition and territorialism lead to inconsistencies, misunderstandings, and mistrust. Of particular importance were the partnerships and collaborative efforts of education with business, industry, nonprofits, churches, and faith-based organizations.

Business and Industry

One specific example of support from the broader community is the partnership with business and industry. These partners not only contribute to a strong tax base, but collaborate with the schools and higher education institutions to ensure that an educated workforce is available. Specifically, the role of the Economic Development Commission (EDC) and the Albany Chamber of Commerce were mentioned as key to new business recruitment and development. The work of the EDC, the chamber, and the business community were viewed as key to the workforce and economic development of the area. While some participants see an opportunity for more local businesses to provide students with scholarships,
internships, and other educational opportunities, participants understand it is important to continue to cultivate and further engage these organizations and entities as full partners in education.

Nonprofits, Churches, and Faith-Based Organizations
Other examples of collaborative work are the partnerships with nonprofits, churches, and faith-based organizations. Several nonprofits were mentioned including, Strive to Thrive, the Boys and Girls Clubs, Girls Inc., Communities in School, and the YMCA. Many participants noted that these partnerships can be strengthened, and that the coordination of services was a must. Additionally, participants would like to explore how these organizations can best work within the structure of schools, both during the school day and in afterschool programs. Finally, the faith-based community was noted as a powerful force that needed to be better leveraged as full educational partners.

Influence of the Media
Several participants noted the role of the media and acknowledged that media coverage is highly relevant to the perception of education in the community. Some participants believe there is a negative public perception of district schools, causing families to remove their children from public schools or leave the county altogether. Some participants believe that, in part, the negative stigma surrounding the DCSS school system is perpetuated by the media, a perception they are working to change. Participants note that the media plays a valuable role in getting positive information to the community and that there is a need to build a stronger and consistent relationship.
More than 60 students from the four area high schools discussed their educational experience at the Board of Education Office in August. These are the themes that emerged from their small and large group discussions.

» The schools have good programs and good people.

The first question — “What do you like about your school?” — revealed that there are both good programs and good people at the schools. Students identified the Career, Technical, Agricultural and Education (CTAE) classes and Increased Learning Time (ILT) as beneficial. Students made specific mentions of principals, teachers, and a student vice president as people who help create a positive atmosphere at the schools.

In addition, students find that school spirit and extracurricular activities, such as band, dance line, and sports are good.

One student summed up his school this way, “Albany High is a school where we are data-driven, success-focused, and student-centered.”

» Student behavior can be a barrier to achievement.

Students were then asked to think about barriers and issues that affect their ability to graduate and go on to post-secondary success. One category of barriers students identified were those related to student behavior, decision making, and influences from other students. Others noted that students skip school and appear to not care about getting an education or taking advantage of the resources that are there. Peer pressure and bullying were factors students voiced as concerns.

» More support from teachers and the school system would help increase achievement.

There was also a sense that teachers and the school system are not behind the students. With regard to teachers, some students feel that teachers don’t encourage or motivate enough, or are not as dedicated or qualified as students would hope. There was a sense that students are not encouraged to think rigorously but rather just pass the next test. Students talked about the lack of technology, whether it is non-working computers, intermittent Wi-Fi, or teachers not understanding the technology well enough to teach or use it in the classroom. Some comments also centered around a lack of recognition, for both those students who have always been successful and those that have overcome difficulties and returned to school.

» Negative perceptions about the schools affect student achievement.

Students also find that the community has a general negative stereotype about all or some of the schools.
that is detrimental to student achievement. One student said, “The community has a set perception of students based on location, so depending on the school the stakeholders already believe that students can’t achieve.”

» **High standards and financial issues put college out of reach.**

Students recognize that there are high standards to get into college and some students cannot meet those standards because of low GPA, standardized test scores or simply “not learning how to read and write.” For those who can meet the standards, students worry about the financial burden of paying for college, and the lack of scholarships.

» **Family issues can distract and derail achievement.**

Finally, whether it is lack of parental involvement or too much family pressure, the environment at home can be an issue that distracts and stresses out students. One student said, “We have to take care of our siblings, so our personal home life makes it hard to focus on school because family comes first.”

» **Students suggested ideas to reduce barriers.**

Students have ideas on how the education system can help remove the barriers. For example, students want to see collaboration, communication, and doing away with the negative stereotypes. Students said it was important to “stop degrading each other’s schools” and “stop classifying schools as one is better than the other.” Others want to see more district leaders interacting with students and more meetings with students to address issues. As one student said in the group discussion “Education is a collaborative effort. There are lots of things that need to be fixed, so we need to work together on solutions, and sometimes that means meeting people halfway.”

The school experience itself can be improved. Students talked about wanting administration and counselors to do more, including providing more time to study and more specific and directed information about scholarships. The availability of resources, including tablets or computers, was noted as one way to help students with their studies and complete assignments.

In addition to identifying what the education system can do to help, students were introspective and identified things they can do to achieve success. Students noted they can take initiative to plan for college, stop procrastinating and participate more in class. Other behavior changes suggested include improving time management skills, studying and asking for help when needed. In the group discussion, one student summed it up by saying that they (the students) have to “take responsibility for our own actions. We have to sacrifice what we want to do in order to get what we really need.”

Students also talked about the desire to harness the good momentum and discussion at the listening session forum. One student remarked that only 50 students participated, so the ones that did participate in the session need to “spread the word around the schools to start a chain reaction.” Others talked about needing to collaborate amongst the students, perhaps by creating a youth council or by going out to talk to others about what they’ve learned. A senior shared that she has learned things that she would like to share with underclassmen to help encourage and motivate them. Another student commented, “We as students should take the initiative to push ourselves as well as our peers, parents, community, etc… to be more involved in our school system as a whole.”

Finally, a student hoped that this conversation could continue with principals and administrators.
Parental and Community Perspective

More than 100 parents and community members gathered in August at Monroe Comprehensive High School to share their thoughts and feedback on the education system in Albany-Dougherty County. As the group considered barriers, issues, priorities and action steps for parents and the community, the following major themes emerged.

» Parents want youth to succeed in school and beyond.

Participating parents have several top priorities for students, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the most frequently mentioned priority was graduating and being prepared for life after high school. Participants believe prepared means possessing strong problem solving, communication and social skills. As one participant put it, students need to “be prepared to succeed in today’s society.”

» Attitude, behavior, and lack of information are often barriers to the success of youth in education and the workforce.

Participants identified multiple barriers that make achieving success in high school and post-secondary education difficult. For one, many see a lack of motivation or positive attitude toward education as limiting student achievement. Some students engage in risky behaviors that distract from school and they expressed concern that the school environment includes bullying or unsupportive teachers. In addition, parents said that not all students have a clear sense of what to do following high school, perhaps due to insufficient school counseling and exposure to colleges or career paths.

Another barrier parents noted is a lack of parental knowledge about what it takes to succeed in high school and beyond. Some parents do not know about available resources or how to find support, while others may not be high school graduates themselves.

In addition to a lack of support, many families do not have the resources to provide for a post-secondary education. Finally, in some instances, students simply do not or cannot meet the testing and graduation requirements to complete high school. Participants believe there is no leeway with the graduation tests, some students do not have the necessary credits to graduate, and some students lack the knowledge or ability to score well on the SAT and ACT exams.

Additionally, information on pathways on jobs and careers are not always clear and contribute to student apathy.

» Educational environments should promote learning for all students.

To prepare students for success, parents said that priorities should include an environment that promotes learning for ALL students. Ways to promote learning include having para-professionals in every classroom, using “rigorous curriculum with researched based strategies” and providing tutoring for those that need it.

Parents want qualified, professional teachers in the schools who are also supportive. They believed that some teachers and administrators do not treat students with the respect and compassion that would be expected in a school. There is a sense that some teachers play favorites or label students.

In addition to good teachers, parents want technology integrated into the classroom and equipment available for all students. Other top priorities include student safety, increased parent involvement, and small class size.

By creating more programs and processes to help all students, parents believe that the current barriers can be removed. They suggest more advisement sessions, more accountability from counselors to help “guide the college preparation process” and the “use
Some parents are concerned that students with behavior issues or learning disabilities are not treated fairly and are labeled ways that make it difficult for them to succeed. Parents and community members believe that eliminating these labels and making sure that all students are provided a quality education will lead to higher student success.

» Encouraging and supporting parental and community involvement in schools is key

To help address a lack of parental involvement and knowledge, participants propose educating parents in what they need to know to help their students. The use of surveys, workshops, meetings and technology could be used to engage and educate parents about issues such as dual enrollment, school curriculum, and college scholarships. Other suggestions include implementing parent-to-parent mentoring and providing incentives for attending meetings.

Parents suggested ways they can address the barriers. They can attend more meetings, including school board meetings, to show that they care and are paying attention to education. Not only can parents show up, they can speak up. This means asking questions and learning effective ways to communicate with school administrators. One participant pointed out that parents need to “follow the chain of command when an issue is not resolved within a school. Keep going until the issue is resolved.” Another pointed out that parents can “be as active in all aspects of the child’s classroom activities as we are in extracurricular activities.”

Parents also noted that they can volunteer, mentor and just generally help out at school more. This means helping other students; parents can “be a strong advocate not just for your own kid, but for others.” Parents and community members can also help with transportation and even financial support for programs that help students in tutoring and extracurricular activities. Community members can solicit help from local businesses and churches. Finally, participants want to make sure that they hold everyone accountable. This means, as one participant put it, to “give ideas and solutions to solve some of the issues and not just complain.”

It’s a community-wide issue. Participants would also like to see more than just parents involved. The entire community can take responsibility for student success through collaboration and community partnerships. One participant would like to see members of the Board of Education making monthly visits to the schools in the district; another would like to see the Albany Chamber of Commerce more involved in promoting education. Finally, in recognition that there are good teachers in the schools, participants want to make sure that these good teachers are retained and rewarded. This might mean increasing teacher pay, offering bonuses or stipends for high quality teachers and providing additional training for teachers to increase their skill set.

Parents and students can help shape our offerings and services for the future.

— David Mosely
Superintendent of Dougherty County School System
Focus Groups

To gather more in-depth information on the issues affecting education in Albany-Dougherty County and obtain input to help shape the direction of the education collaborative, the UGA team facilitated community focus groups.

In total, 53 individuals participated in seven different focus groups discussions in July, including representatives of:

- Dougherty County School Board;
- Dougherty County School Principals and Assistant Principals;
- Nonprofit organizations;
- Albany Chamber members and business people;
- Albany State University faculty, staff and administrators;
- Albany Technical College faculty, staff and administrators; and
- Darton State College faculty, staff and administrators.

The intent of the focus groups was to better understand the risk factors that contribute to the dropout or interruption of schooling identified during the July Education Summit and to examine the institutional, organizational, and community assets that could be built on for the betterment of education in the county.

Additionally, focus group participants were asked for their insights on programs and initiatives outside of the county that could be explored for possible application to Dougherty County.

» The call for a coordinated collaborative effort.

The major finding across focus groups was the call for a visionary, comprehensive, coordinated education agenda that can be embraced by the Albany-Dougherty County community. Focus group participants called for coordinated and integrated strategies that engage the greater Albany-Dougherty County community in a collective approach that supports students and families while creating and sustaining a high achieving school environment. This idea of an inclusive process where all segments of the community are invited to participate was also noted as an Education Summit finding.

Other major findings, described below, contribute to a better understanding of the present state of education in the county, address student and community needs, and identify programs/services that work. Still, it is important to note that participants were weary of the creation of additional “band-aid” programs, preferring instead “proven programs that were research-based and could be applied across schools.”

Establish a process for early identification of PK-12 needs.

- Establish a process for the early identification of PK-12 student and teacher needs that is then shared with local nonprofits, the Albany Chamber, businesses, and the three higher education institutions. In such a process, nonprofits seeking to work with PK-12 could design or re-design their services to meet the academic and support needs of students or individual schools. This would allow youth serving nonprofits to collectively plan alongside the schools to reduce duplication and maximize outcomes.

- Investigate reinstating Child Find (or similar program) to identify under-served children prior to entry in Pre-K or Kindergarten. Need to ensure that child’s developmental, emotional, and medical needs are tracked from birth so that they are prepared when they enter school. One example offered by a focus group cited a child who entered Kindergarten not knowing basic hygiene and had not been potty trained.
Focus on academic support and dropout prevention programs that work.

Several existing programs were noted as working well. These are mentioned below and should be further explored for possible duplication or expansion.

- Pre-K programs are in place at Albany State, Albany Technical College, YMCA, and DCSS. All these were noted as needing expansion to accommodate more students.
- Extended Learning Days: Students arrive at school one hour earlier or remain after school for an hour of academic work. Title I funded, this program has students catch up on their missed school work and is considered an aid to retention efforts.
- Performance Learning Center (PLC): housed adjacent to Monroe Comprehensive High School, PLC is a partnership of Communities in Schools, Albany Technical College and the Dougherty County School System. PLC is designed to help improve high school graduation rates while allowing students to earn college credit at Albany Technical College and prepare for a career. PLC is limited by the number of student slots — presently 15 from each high school for a total of 60 students.

Enhance joint enrollment opportunities and post-secondary preparatory skills.

- Joint enrollment success is evident; focus group participants noted a need to increase access and opportunity.
- Some students enter postsecondary institutions unable to qualify for basic math (97 and 99) and are therefore required to take these non-credit courses in college. DCSS and post-secondary institutions could partner to ensure students are competent in these skills, as well as in skills required for the COMPASS test.

Strengthen PK-12 pipeline through system-wide, proven and sustainable efforts.

The principal and assistant principal focus group spoke about the “human factor” and the importance of prepared teachers, support staff, involved parents, and dedicated volunteers. They expressed a need for additional instructional staff to work with students, especially those that have fallen behind or need additional instructional support. This group called for the creation of a comprehensive, system-wide plan that takes into account both the educational aspirations of the county and the comprehensive needs of the child/family. The group advocated for a system-wide plan that encompasses programs that cut across elementary, middle and high schools.

Increase the level of collaboration among the three higher education institutions.

The level of collaboration among the three higher education institutions has increased over the last several months, however, silos and competitive relationships exist. Additionally, misperceptions about the mission and academic quality of the institutions draw students away from these institutions and consequently away from Dougherty County.

There were several suggestions to strengthen these relationships:

- Encourage institution-to-institution dialogue on ways to address the lack of preparation that some students transfer with, inclusive of deficiencies in the common core. Participants asked, “Are there new ways of teaching or co-teaching that can be explored among institutions?”
- Develop mutually beneficial outreach and marketing plans. Within the scope of the plan, promote the idea that there are different routes to a higher education degree.
- Create cross-institution work groups that would serve to increase cooperation and communication. For example, a work group can be charged with furthering a better understanding of the offerings of each institution, operationalizing articulation agreements, and helping to facilitate a process for data driven decisions.
- Create articulation agreements and coursework such as the Albany Technical College Associate of Applied Science (AAS) degree in Fire Science Technology that allows graduates to apply all of the credits earned toward a Bachelor of Applied Science degree in Fire Services Administration at Albany State University.
- Continue collaborations such as the new grant alliance between Albany Technical College and Darton State University. These institutions created an alliance among their grants directors
to exchange options for shared federal, state, and other grants or refer grants to each other.

- Identify and offer opportunities to students across institutions. For example, Darton State would be willing to open First Year Experience program to the broader community, and institutions could share lists of community resources.

Build on the partnerships with area businesses, Chamber, and the Marine Base.

- More can be done to strengthen the Partners in Excellence program. The program leadership has been inconsistent (a series of interim or part-time people) and many view it as a vehicle for donations only. In light of the new relationship among the four educational leaders, Partners in Excellence needs to be explored to determine what else the program can offer to this school/business collaborative.
- The Marine Corps Logistics Base mentoring program in particular was mentioned as a community asset.

Strengthen communication and collaborative efforts with nonprofits and the faith communities to help students persist in school.

- Establish an early warning mechanism through which nonprofits and faith-based organizations can work alongside schools and parents to help students who need additional support. Mentoring and parent support programs such as Strive to Thrive, and the YMCA – 21st century program were mentioned as effective approaches.
- Increase the involvement of churches and faith-based organizations as church leaders are influential members of the community and are key to any community planning effort.

Build the relationship with city and county elected officials.

- Some focus group participants stated that the DCSS and City of Albany relationship is a contentious one; city officials and leaders have communicated to the school system that it “needs to get its act together” before the city will allocate resources or provide funds for programs. School administrators and others state that many children are in difficult family situations and are already significantly lacking basic life skills before they enter the school system, making school readiness and success

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1 The Partners in Excellence Program is the [DCSS] school system’s premier school business partnership program that pairs businesses, community organizations, and civic organizations with schools to promote excellence in education. Through these partnerships, more than 240 business and community organizations are helping students to reach their highest level of academic success. [http://www.albanyherald.com/news/2012/oct/17/phoebe-recognized-as-a-special-partner-in](http://www.albanyherald.com/news/2012/oct/17/phoebe-recognized-as-a-special-partner-in)
particularly difficult. Participants specifically noted that city expectations need to be defined and resources and other assistance to help meet those expectations need to be provided. Finally, participants noted that the lack of support from the city contributes to DCSS’s negative image.

**Influence and role of the media.**

- As noted in the Education Summit, focus group participants believe the media highly contributes to the perception of education in the county. Focus group participants, in particular some with direct contact or responsibility with DCSS, believe there is a negative public perception of district schools that is perpetuated by the media. As in the Education Summit, participants note that the media plays a valuable role in getting positive information to the community and that there is a need to build a stronger and consistent relationship for more balanced education and system coverage.

**Education efforts to investigate establish or replicate.**

Several programs and initiatives were mentioned as having possible application and benefit to Dougherty County. Among those mentioned:

- A 9th Grade Academy for all students or students at risk of being retained or dropping out. The Performance Learning Center starts in 10th grade; yet 9th grade dropout is an issue. Lee County has a 9th Grade Campus for all students.²

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²The Lee County High School 9th Grade Campus was established as a separate campus for 9th graders to try and reach students during the crucial impressionable years and keep those students on track to go to Lee County High School with sophomore credit. Students take the core subjects of 9th Grade Literature or Honors 9th Literature, Math 1 or Honors Math 1, Honors Biology, Environmental Science, Civics or Honors Civics, Health, and other various electives. Currently, students must have 25 Carnegie Unit Credits to graduate from Lee County High School, and the 9th Grade Campus is designed to get students on the right path to reach this graduation goal. From the Lee County High School 9th grade campus homepage [http://www.lee.k12.ga.us/lchs9/academics/index.html](http://www.lee.k12.ga.us/lchs9/academics/index.html)

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- The Southwire 12-for-Life programs developed in 2007 in partnership with Carroll County schools.³
- Explore additional easy access academic re-entry programs for high school students who due to family, health, financial, or other life experiences dropped out of school or interrupted their education.
- Explore the benefits of an alternative school schedule over 12 months to reduce effects of ‘summer slide.’

Finally, focus group participants stated that the DCSS was in need of more trained social workers as presently there are three social workers for a 16,000 student district. They strongly suggested that more programs would not be of benefit, preferring instead the strategic use of existing resources and funding.

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³Southwire developed the cooperative 12-for-Life program with Carroll County, Ga. schools in 2007. They provide students with a place where they could mix classroom time with time on the floor at a real manufacturing plant, gaining an education, a paycheck, key work and life skills, and the all-important hope for a diploma, for success in the workplace, and for a better life. How it works. The only program of its kind, 12-for-Life seeks to instill in students the belief that if they complete a full 12 years of education, they will have better lives. It’s a truly cooperative program, a partnership between community and school that targets students who are at a tipping point in their life. 12-for-Life is not a vo-tech program. Instead, our program administrators work with each individual student to customize an education, training, and work plan built around each student’s unique challenges and needs to help that student graduate on time – and with a regular high school diploma. From the Southwire website: [http://www.12forlife.com/solution.html](http://www.12forlife.com/solution.html)
Stakeholder Interviews

Stakeholders were interviewed individually or in small groups over several months beginning in July 2014. Interviewees included elected officials as well as corporate, nonprofit and other leaders.

Because stakeholders represented a diverse group, a wide array of findings resulted. Overall, however, interviewees were consistently encouraged by the development of the collaboration and level of participation in the education summit, and showed willingness to support the collaborative effort.

Interviewees offered several ideas and suggestions for the county. They would like to see the educational collaborative focus on:

- Pre-K as well as 3rd grade achievement;
- Assessing what core services are needed and working to align those with the services provided by nonprofit and faith-based sectors;
- Investigating a regional budgeting approach for education in Southwest Georgia to make collaboration more compelling;
- Defining measurable goals and increasing accountability; and
- Recognizing student achievement and the work of teachers and administrators.

Additionally the stakeholders discussed local collaborations that were working well and collaborations outside the county or state that may be replicated in Dougherty County.

» Collaborations that are working:
  - Freedom of Choice program, an agreement between Marine Corps Logistics Base and the Dougherty, Lee, and Worth County school systems that allows Marine personnel to choose which school their children will attend;
  - Professional Development and Training agreements between Marine Corps Logistics Base and three higher education institutions for active duty and civilian personnel;
  - Higher education institutions collaborate with hospital for student clinical training and practicums for nursing programs;
  - Goal Program, which provides financial assistance to economically disadvantaged students to attend private schools;
  - Programs with nonprofit organizations such as Communities in Schools and the YMCA;
  - Medical Arts Program at Westover High School — a college prep center for students interested in health sciences;
  - Magnet schools — middle schools that feed into the high schools such as Albany High/criminal justice, Westover High/medical arts, Monroe High/technical, and Dougherty High/performing arts;
  - Partners in Excellence — a partnership program that pairs businesses, community organizations, and civic organizations with schools to promote excellence in education; and
  - Mentoring programs with the Albany Chamber of Commerce and the Marine Corps Logistics Base.

» Collaborations from elsewhere that may work in Dougherty County:

- Waycross Career Academy, a unified approach between colleges, industry, and vocation to educate students that allows them to work in regional industries near their home towns;
- El Paso initiative, a community-school partnership committed to excellence in instruction, student social development, and community engagement;
- Youth Challenge Academy, a program that gives 16- to 18- year-old high school dropouts a second chance; operated by the National Guard, currently in Fort Gordon and Fort Stewart;
• College and Career Academy — this approach pairs high school subject matter with specific career paths and may include dual enrollment and internships;
• Charter schools1 — public schools that operate independently; and
• Leadership Development Academy to teach leadership skills to high schools students and young adults.

» What stakeholders said they were willing to do to support the collaborative:

• Reach out to companies;
• Attend monthly school board and county commission meetings to be more informed and show support;
• Call a joint meeting of local elected officials from the city, county and school board;
• Make sure the state appropriates funds for education;
• Explore funding for a College and Career Academy; and
• Help create business internships.

Finally, stakeholders commented that some individuals who have resources don’t have a vested interest in being involved in the public school system. The business community and others must be willing to commit to educating all children for the good of the entire community.

1 "A charter school is a nonsectarian public school of choice that operates with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools." Source: Georgia Charter Schools Association [http://www.gacharters.org/newsroom/faq/#](http://www.gacharters.org/newsroom/faq/#)
Conclusions and Recommendations

This process of listening to the voices of the Dougherty County community provided information and real-life stories supported by county and state data. While the county and state data told us “how many” and provided insight into trends, the listening sessions, focus groups, and interviews provided insights into the life experiences and every day challenges of the students and parents.

From this assessment we can arrive at three major conclusions:

1. **Educator, adult and other support systems matter in every grade and all the time,**
2. **The economic vitality of the community depends on increasing the overall educational attainment of its citizens, and**
2. **The county must lead with an educated workforce that is ready with technical and life skills.**

Taking steps to ensure that all Albany-Dougherty County students and young adults have a supportive academic and life environment and are workforce-ready is the focus of our recommendations.

Recommendations

This process provided an opportunity to hear and learn from a wide segment of the Albany-Dougherty County community. As we explored the factors and trends that affect Albany-Dougherty County’s PK-16 system it was evident that while several issues are school-system and post-secondary institution specific, many of the issues and challenges were long-standing and embedded in social and economic factors. Community members noted that the problems were interconnected and required the input and cooperation of the entire community for things to change. Moreover, just as the issues have been long-standing, the community acknowledged that change will happen overtime and a long-term commitment to working on issues is needed.

Therefore, as next steps, the UGA team recommends a **two-fold approach:** a long-term, collaborative approach that involves multiple sectors and the entire Dougherty County community, and a shorter-term undertaking that explores strategies for a few possibilities that can explored or initiated over the next 6-18 months. At the right time, these short-term initiatives can be incorporated into the longer-term work.

A **long-term, collaborative process focused on changing the Albany-Dougherty County educational landscape and leading to a career/workforce ready community**

Changing the educational landscape of the county is not only a long-term effort, it is one that participants acknowledged as starting long before a child reaches school-age. A birth to adulthood educational collaborative is one that, instead of stretching over years, **requires a commitment of decades.** This is not an effort any one institution can move forward on its own, it requires the shared commitment of each institution and sector as key collaborators.

**Share the findings throughout the community and across sectors**

Sharing the findings of this report and possible next steps helps create a message of commitment to an educated and workforce-ready Dougherty County. As important partners, it is critical to engage the media and other communication vehicles to **share the report** with students, parents, educators, business people, nonprofits, government entities, and civic groups.

**Leadership and accountability**

An undertaking of this magnitude requires dedicated personnel to help drive the long-term effort, (define
goals, develop and maintain partnerships, coordinate the sharing of information) and work on short term strategies. The financial support of grantors and contributors is key to a sustained effort.

As initial steps, the UGA team recommends identifying resources to create an entity to **focus on the collaborative every day**. Led by a stakeholder group, the entity would focus on the formation of a community process that works collectively and across sectors to define what economic vitality means for Dougherty County, establish community goals to increase educational attainment and economic self-sufficiency, and engage the community in solutions.

For long term and sustained change to occur, the collaborative would need to continuously **educate the community and provide support to emerging community leaders** committed to strengthening the educational pipeline and increasing opportunities for area economic growth and development.

As part of the process, **we recommend the creation of a multi-sector, collaborative work group** to map a preliminary work plan, determine initial steps and draft a long-term timeline.

**Short-term strategies to move forward**

Based on the findings from this report, as well as county and state level data, the UGA team recommends the exploration of seven strategies to consider in the short-term. Discussed in this next section, some of the recommendations may require additional resources, but all involve the development of cross-institutional or cross sector work. A lead entity to serve as the issue convener is recommended and indicated in parenthesis for each of the seven strategies.

1. **Work with school personnel and area nonprof-its** to establish a process for the early identification of PK-12 student and teacher needs that is aligned and shared with local nonprofits, the Albany Chamber, businesses, and the three higher education institutions. In such a process, entities working or seeking to work with PK-12 can design or re-design their services to meet the academic and support needs of students and schools. In particular, the process would allow nonprofits to plan alongside the schools to reduce duplication and maximize outcomes (DCSS and United Way of Southwest Georgia).

2. **Invest in school district and postsecondary joint marketing strategies** that illustrate different pathways to a postsecondary education and a four-year college degree. Create a mass marketing strategy that is aimed at students, young adults, parents and teachers/counselors. Work with the school system and local media to deliver this message (Higher Education Institutions).

3. Through existing school system avenues, **provide leadership skills training to parents, guardians and community members** who can be knowledgeable about and provide input for system improvement (DCSS).

4. **Explore the feasibility of creating a system wide 9th grade academy**. Develop cohort wide common messages for all 9th graders and points of knowledge important to the cohort as they become sophomores, juniors and then seniors. Track student progress and system learnings (DCSS).

5. **Meet with area business leaders and create a work group** to explore how to increase high school to college options and high school to work readiness. This group can determine how to expand existing programs or develop new ones that meet the education and economic needs of Dougherty County. Explore the possibility of a College to Career Academy (DCSS and Chamber).

6. **Bring together faculty from the three higher education institutions** to discuss how their institutions can jointly add to the economic vitality of the community. Issues to consider: how to align educational standards, map coursework and work with school system teachers and staff for increased student academic preparation (Higher Education Institutions).

7. **Explore ways to create or reinstate early identification programs** to help students enter school prepared to learn, and in later grades provide **accessible points of school re-entry** for those that interrupted their schooling due to personal or academic issues (DCSS.)

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