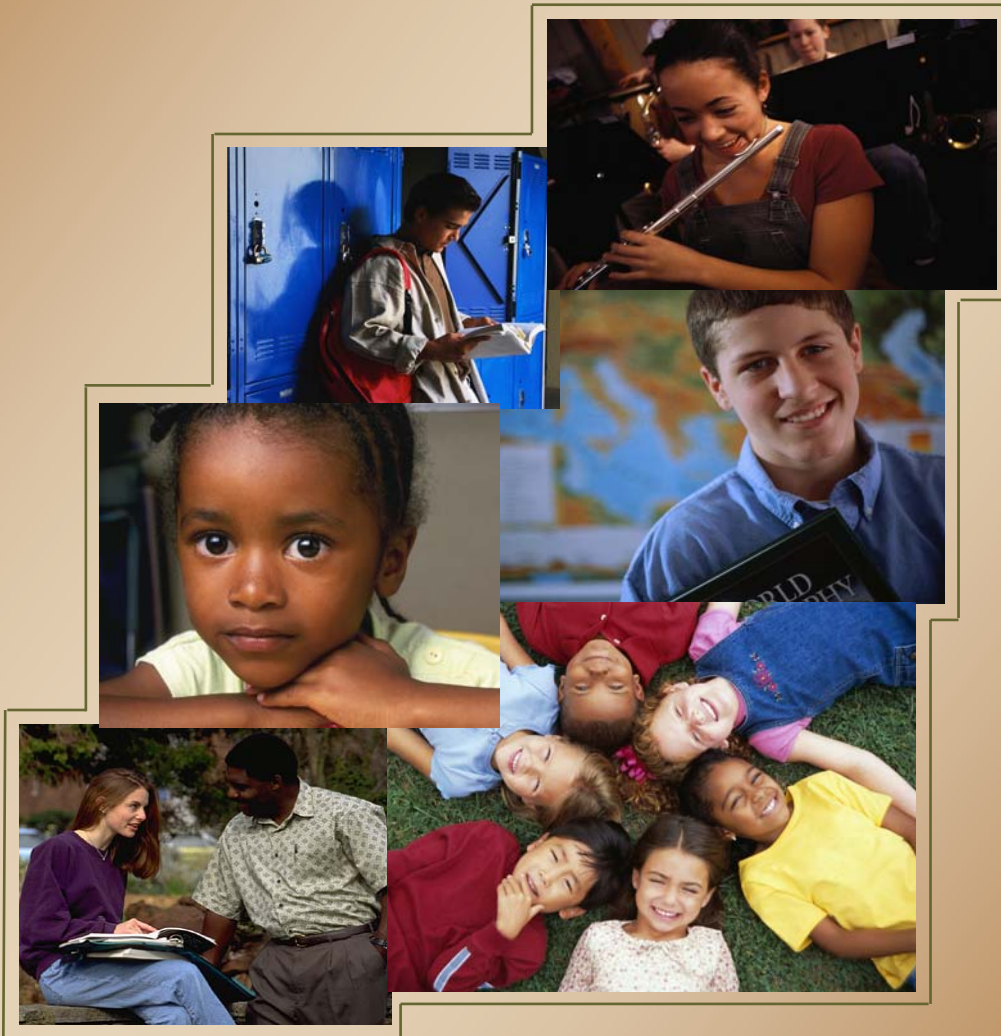


# INVESTING IN OMAHA'S CHILDREN AND YOUTH

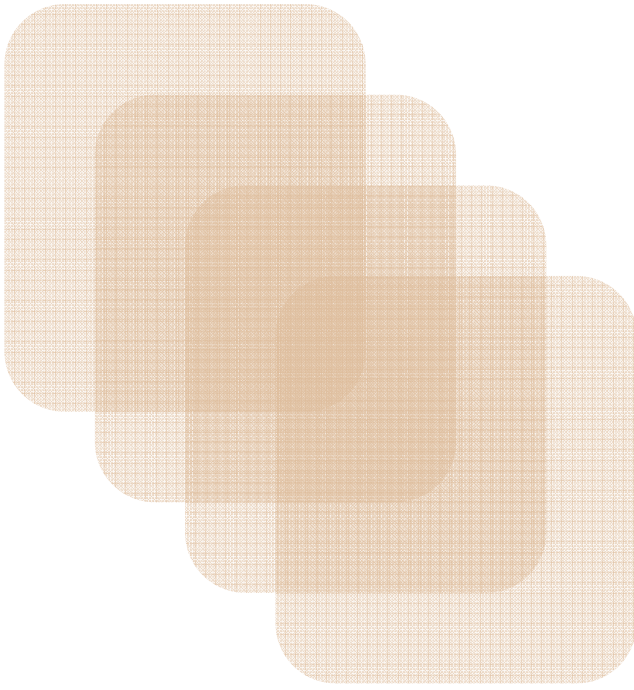


## MASTER PLAN



April 2007



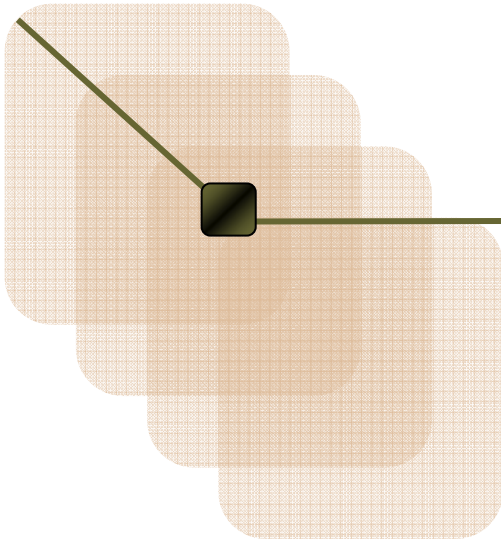


# Investing in Omaha's Children and Youth

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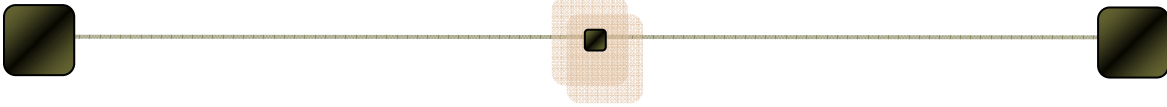
# Youth and Children Are Omaha's Future

## The Urgent Need to Sustain the Youth Development Pipeline

By all measures, Omaha is a great place to live, work, and raise a family. Strong economic foundations and a competitive cost of living have produced a vibrant, diversified economy and a high quality of life for Omaha's residents. *Forbes* ranked Omaha as the 11th best city for business and careers based on economic and quality of life factors, and *Child* magazine rated Omaha as one of the 15 best cities for families nationwide.

With strong prospects for growth in business investments and high-paying, high-tech jobs, Omaha's government and business leaders view its youth as a vital economic asset—the human capital that will make Omaha prosperous and competitive in the global economy. Accordingly, community leaders are asking themselves whether Omaha is doing all that it can to maximize the potential of its youth.



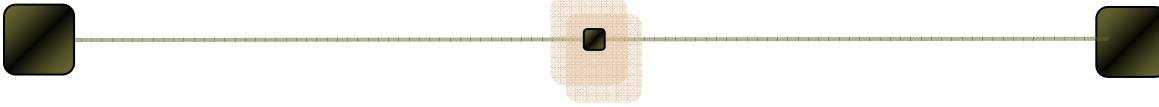


Within this context, Mayor Mike Fahey and a group of concerned Omaha citizens, led by Richard Holland, Michael Yanney, Susie Buffett, Andy Holland, Wally and Barbara Weitz, Dianne Lozier, and Jerry and Cookie Hoberman, launched an initiative focused on improving academic performance, raising high school graduation rates, and rewarding every economically disadvantaged high school graduate in the Omaha Metropolitan Area with the financial means for an education after high school.

The first step was to commission SRI International to prepare a comprehensive catalogue of impediments to high achievement and high school graduation, inventory existing efforts and resources to support youth, and devise a broad-based plan that could bring together the entire community—public and private, business and labor, academic, and religious—in a common effort to transform the Omaha Metropolitan Area’s educational system into the best-performing one in the nation.

**The goal of the study was to find out what more could be done to ensure that all Omaha youth receive the education, training, and support needed to enable and motivate them to seize economic opportunities and achieve a productive future.**

This document is the result of that work. It begins with an examination of the developmental pipeline of Omaha’s children and youth, the opportunities and the challenges and threats they face from the time they are born to the time they become productive citizens, and the cost to Omaha and the nation of letting youth fail. The second section highlights six areas where action is warranted—for each it defines the scope of the challenge, inventories key community resources, and suggests strategic priorities to address the challenge. The final section lays out a plan of action for implementing these strategic options. The first step in the implementation phase will be the formation of several Task Forces that bring together leaders in the different initiative areas to consider the strategic priorities laid out in this document, assess all the options, and make specific recommendations for actions to overcome the barriers facing Omaha’s youth.

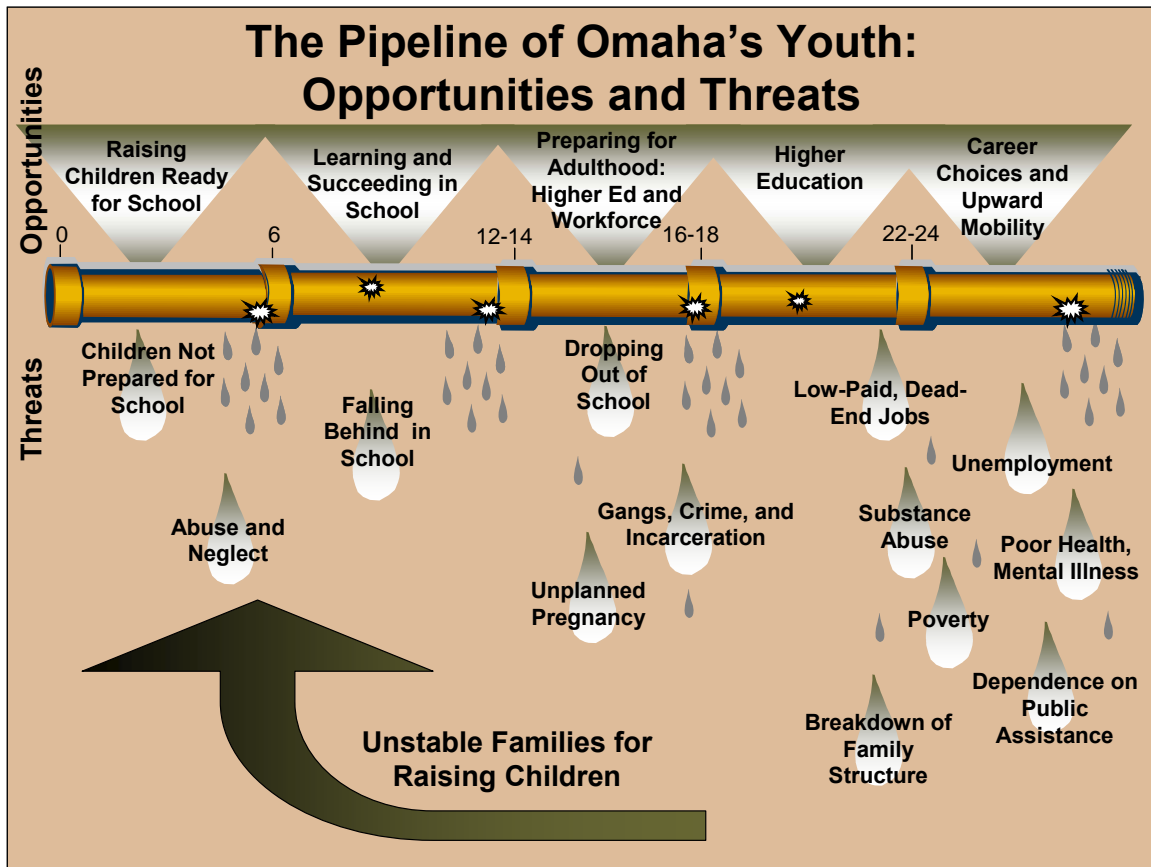


## The Youth Pipeline: Opportunities and Threats

The lives of Omaha's children and youth and the opportunities available to them can be visualized by using a pipeline analogy. Each child is presented with a number of positive opportunities, marked by key transition points over time. The journey of becoming ready for and learning in school and pursuing higher education and careers—that is, becoming productive members of society—can be relatively easy and trouble free— if children benefit from stable families, positive role models, good schools, and safe and nurturing communities.

With proper supports and preparation throughout their lives, all youth have opportunities to develop into young adults with career choices and the ability to reach their full potential. Children who receive intellectual stimulation and proper nutrition in their early years are better prepared for school. Arriving at school ready to learn helps young students become fluent readers and writers by the 3rd grade, which, in turn, opens the door for continued learning and success in school. In adolescence, preparation for the future begins with training for a career or gearing up for higher education and finding the resources necessary for college.

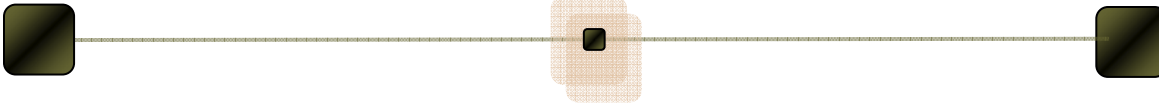
For young people who do not enjoy these advantages, especially those who grow up under an almost opposite set of circumstances, the chances to make this journey successfully are limited at best. In Omaha and across the country, many youth do not receive the supports necessary to keep them in the pipeline toward productivity. There are many threats facing children and youth that make them vulnerable to leaving the pipeline at any point in their development. The prospects of these at-risk children are greatly diminished, and getting back on track is difficult.



With little hope for the future, youth who have left the pipeline often engage in risky or delinquent behaviors that are detrimental to their healthy development and costly to society. Some join gangs for a sense of belonging and to make money. Some use drugs or alcohol to cope with problems. Their considerable needs for guidance and support often go unmet.

The pathways for most dropouts hold little promise for financial security. With few skills and low education levels, dropouts are likely to be unemployable. Those who do work often secure employment in a series of low-paying, dead-end jobs. Difficulties making ends meet can lead to involvement in criminal enterprises, which, in turn, leads to higher incarceration rates. Many dropouts end up on public assistance, which further limits the chances of upward mobility for them and their children.

Adults who succumb to these poor life outcomes—poverty, poor health, substance abuse, crime, and incarceration—are less able to provide a stable financial and family environment for their



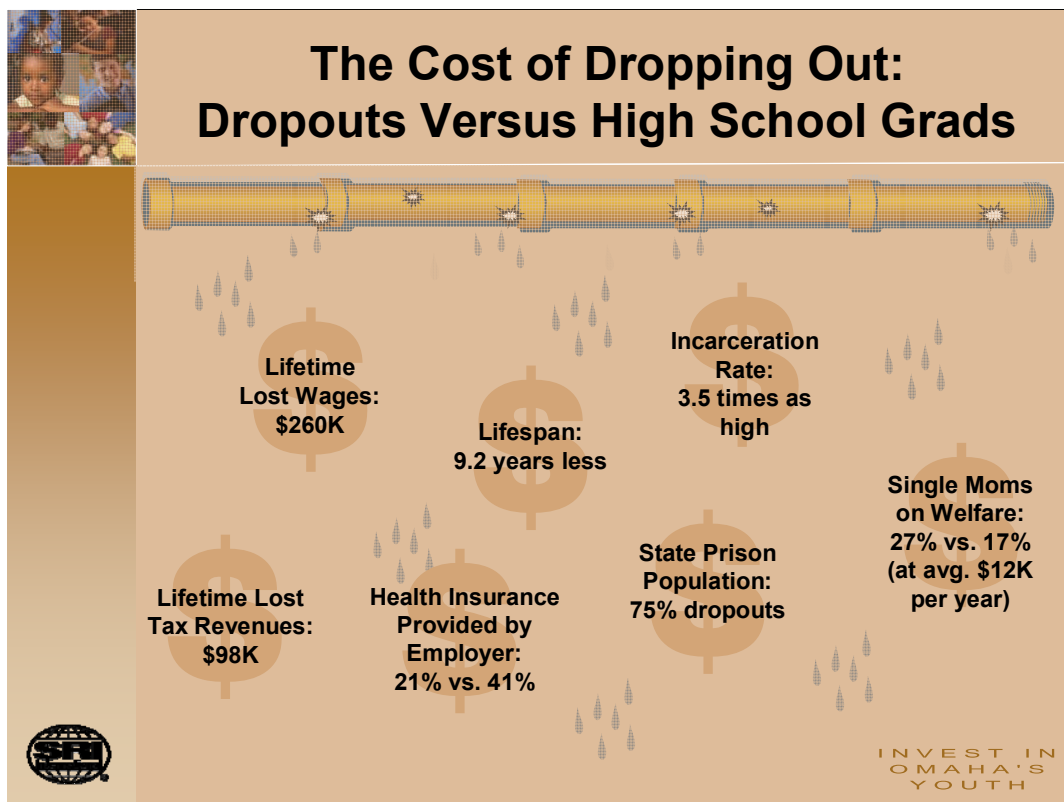
children. Unfortunately, children who are born and grow up in an unstable environment become disadvantaged right from the start of the pipeline, thus perpetuating a vicious cycle.

### Risks Facing Omaha's Youth

- **Before Birth.** Even before they are born, children whose mothers do not have access to sufficient nutrition or health care, or whose mothers engage in substance abuse, are much more likely to develop health problems or learning disabilities.
- **Birth to Age 6.** Children who experience insufficient pre-kindergarten preparation of basic learning and social skills are more likely to perform poorly in school.
- **Ages 6 to 11.** Younger students might exhibit emotional or behavioral difficulties associated with not being prepared to learn. Children who fall behind in elementary school tend to become disillusioned and form bad attitudes and habits. As they get older, these children find it increasingly difficult to keep up with their peers in the classroom.
- **Ages 12 to 16.** In adolescence, some students become disengaged and unmotivated to continue. At some point, they cease to see education as a vehicle for their future success. They might do their homework less and start skipping school. Eventually, believing that they have little to gain from school, they drop out altogether. Youth are particularly vulnerable during this period, during which many drop out of school, experiment with drugs, experience unplanned pregnancies, and join gangs.
- **Ages 17 to 18.** By this time, if at-risk youth have not reengaged with the system through some form of intervention, they are likely to have been lost to systems of support.

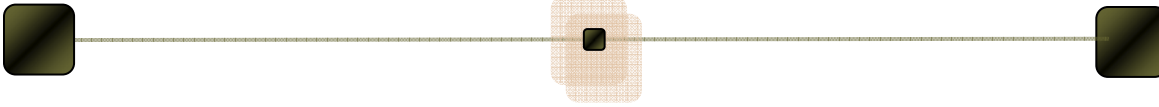
## The Cost of Letting Youth Fail

Leaving the pipeline not only puts individuals at risk for a lifetime of negative outcomes, it also imposes significant social and financial costs on the community. A key, defining event related to the loss of youth from a positive stream of opportunities is dropping out of school. Numerous studies have been conducted on the impact of dropping out on individuals and on society, and these costs are staggering. The diagram below summarizes some of the most significant and quantifiable costs of dropping out to individuals and society.



Compared with high school graduates, dropouts:

- **Earn less over a lifetime.** The average annual earnings difference between those with a high school diploma and dropouts was estimated at \$11,000 in 2004. Over a lifetime,



this earnings differential comes to \$260,000 in current dollars between a high school dropout and a high school graduate.<sup>a</sup>

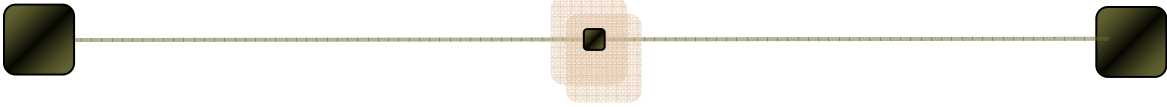
- **Pay fewer taxes.** Because dropouts are likely to be unemployed and earn less when they are employed, they pay fewer income taxes than high school graduates. In 2004, high school dropouts paid an average of \$3,374 in total taxes, less than half of the average taxes paid by a high school graduate. Adding it up over a lifetime, the difference in tax contribution between a high school dropout and a high school graduate is estimated at \$98,000.<sup>b</sup>
- **Live with poorer health conditions.** A high school dropout, on average, lives 9.2 years less than a high school graduate. Perhaps even more telling is the fact that the average 45-year-old dropout is in worse health than a 65-year-old high school graduate. Dropouts are more likely to die prematurely of cardiovascular diseases, cancer, infection, lung disease, and diabetes. The risk factors for all these conditions—stress, poor diet, poor housing conditions, smoking, drinking, substance abuse—can be linked to educational attainment, employment, and income. Dropouts are also more likely to die of injury, probably because they are more likely to take menial jobs that expose them to a higher risk of on-the-job injury.<sup>1</sup>
- **Are not as well insured.** Dropouts have less health insurance coverage as a group. Even among the dropouts who are employed, employer health insurance coverage is lower than among high school graduates—21 percent versus 41 percent. As a result, dropouts have less access to regular health maintenance services and tend to seek medical treatment only when conditions are more acute. Dropouts are also more likely than high school graduates to be enrolled in public insurance, such as Medicaid (17 percent versus 13 percent). In all, a high school dropout is estimated to incur \$83,000 in additional health costs during his or her lifetime, compared with a person who advanced one more year in high school.<sup>c</sup>
- **Receive more welfare or public assistance.** Single-mother dropouts constitute the largest group of women on welfare and other types of public assistance. In 2002, 27 percent of single-

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<sup>a</sup> The calculation assumes a 50-year working life, average annual earnings growth of 1.5 percent, and a discount rate of 3.5 percent.

<sup>b</sup> Calculations include Social Security contributions.

<sup>c</sup> Calculations made in current dollars.



mother dropouts were on welfare, compared with 17 percent of high school graduates and less than 1 percent of single mothers with higher education. Dropouts accounted for nearly half of the single mothers receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Using these national averages, increasing the education level of dropouts to high school graduates could remove more than 292,000 women from the current welfare rolls, saving the federal government up to \$3.5 billion annually in welfare costs. Similarly, if all single-mother dropouts earned a high school diploma, there could be 140,000 fewer recipients of food stamps, saving \$353 million per year. Savings are even greater when women pursue higher education; by one estimate, if all single-mother dropouts earned a high school diploma and pursued higher education at the same rate as the average high school graduate, annual spending on TANF, food stamps, and housing assistance would be reduced by at least \$7.9 billion.<sup>2</sup>

- **Commit more crime and are more likely to be incarcerated.** Dropping out does not automatically result in a life of crime. The vast majority of individuals who drop out are law-abiding citizens. However, data show that dropouts are far more likely than high school graduates to be arrested and incarcerated. According to data from the U.S. Department of Justice, three-quarters of state prison inmates are dropouts, as are 59 percent of federal inmates.<sup>3</sup> The financial costs of crime, not to mention the human costs, cannot be overstated. These costs include loss of property; medical expenses for victims; loss of victims' income; rising police payrolls; and, most expensive of all, the cost of administering criminal justice, including court costs and the costs of incarceration. By some estimates, each juvenile delinquent (ages 14 to 17) imposes \$83,000 to \$355,000 in crime-related costs on society, while each adult career criminal adds another \$1.4 million.<sup>4</sup>



## Why Omaha Needs to Invest in Youth

Underachievement and dropping out are nationwide challenges, particularly in the context of U.S. national competitiveness. Omaha is no exception—as in comparable midsize cities in the Midwest, not all of Omaha’s high school graduates are prepared for the world of work and higher education, and too many fail to graduate.

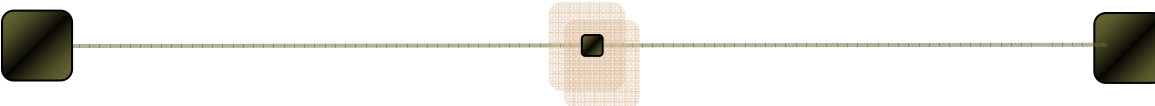
The overall graduation rate in the 11 school districts in the Omaha Metropolitan Area is 80 percent, implying a dropout rate of about 20 percent.<sup>d</sup> Dropout rates vary dramatically across the region’s different school districts and roughly mirror income distribution. Across the individual school districts, dropout rates range from 0 percent in Bennington and South Sarpy to 32 percent in Omaha Public Schools (OPS). This difference is no surprise, considering that OPS is the largest, most urban school district in the region, serving a disproportionately large number of low-income and very-low-income students (as indicated by the fact that 53 percent of OPS students qualify for free or reduced-price meals).

Across all 11 school systems, these data suggest that 1,900 of the 9,687 students who were 9<sup>th</sup> graders in 2005-06 will drop out of school. Most of these predicted dropouts would be among OPS students; using these estimates, 1,611 out of 5,018 OPS students enrolled in 9<sup>th</sup> grade in 2005-06 are unlikely to graduate.<sup>e</sup>

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<sup>d</sup> For the purpose of estimating dropouts from Omaha’s school districts, the study team used the graduation data collected by Nebraska’s Department of Education. Details of the calculations can be found at the Department’s website.

<sup>e</sup> Local data presented in this report were collected from a variety of sources. Please note that data may cover different geographical segments of the Omaha Metropolitan Area or its school districts, depending on the source of data.



Graduation Rates and Projected Dropout Rates in Omaha's School Districts				
School District	Graduation Rate 2004-05	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade Enrollment 2005-06	Projected Dropouts for Current 9 <sup>th</sup> Graders	Percent on Free/ Reduced-Price Meals
Bellevue	94%	826	54	22
Bennington	100%	60	0	10
Douglas County West	96%	52	2	28
Elkhorn	96%	284	11	7
Gretna	99%	158	2	6
Millard	94%	1,655	104	8
<b>Omaha</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>5,018</b>	<b>1,611</b>	<b>53</b>
Papillion-La Vista	92%	714	54	16
Ralston	90%	272	27	34
South Sarpy	100%	107	0	12
Westside Community Schools	94%	541	35	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>9,687</b>	<b>1,900</b>	

Source: Nebraska Department of Education 4-year high school completion rate, based on standards published by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Because the problem confronting Omaha is similar to that being experienced nationwide, why should an unprecedented initiative be considered to address it? In fact, there is a compelling rationale for Omaha to take on the challenge of supporting all of its youth.

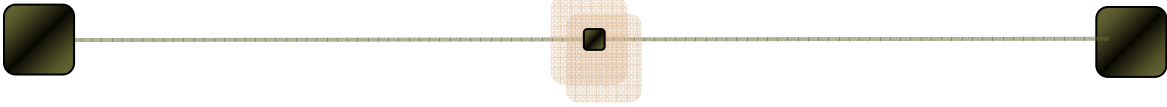
As the data bear out, the majority of these dropouts—youth who are lost to systems of support—are left at best with the prospects of substandard lives characterized by greater unemployment, low wages, limited access to health care, and standards of living close to or below the poverty line. At worst, they will encounter drug addiction and criminal behavior, which not only diminish their lives even further but also affect society as a whole.

The human toll on the lost youth themselves is striking, and the toll on the city of Omaha is just as great. The city's future will be shaped by all who live in it. As a result, the effects of lost youth on the health and vitality of the community are substantial.

## The Impact of Dropouts on Omaha

- **Labor force.** The modern, global economy is driven by industries that can attract and retain workers with high levels of advanced skills and aptitudes. High school dropouts cannot fulfill these needs, thus jeopardizing Omaha's ability to develop and sustain globally and nationally competitive industries.
- **Lost earnings.** The region can expect to lose lifetime earnings of about \$494 million from each grade's group of dropouts ( $\$260,000 \times 1,900$ ). Earnings for Omaha would increase by more than \$1 billion if current dropouts were to graduate and obtain higher education at the same rate as all high school graduates.
- **Less spending.** Individual spending supports income and employment for others. Using an income-to-spending multiplier of 2.0, the loss of lifetime spending from each class of dropouts amounts to between \$1 billion and \$2 billion (see lost-earnings assumptions above).<sup>f</sup>
- **Lost tax revenues.** The loss of lifetime income tax revenues for each class of dropouts amounts to about \$186 million ( $\$98,000 \times 1,900$ ).
- **Higher public health costs.** The additional health expenditures incurred by Omaha's dropouts, including public health expenditures, will total \$158 million ( $\$83,000 \times 1,900$ ).
- **Loss in lifespan.** Since dropouts have lower life expectancy, on average, the loss in lifespan for this group will be 17,480 years ( $9.2 \text{ years} \times 1,900$ ).
- **Higher crime-related costs.** The Alliance for Excellent Education estimates that a 5 percent increase in male high school graduation rates in Nebraska will yield annual crime-related savings of \$16,519,921 to Nebraska, a considerable part of which will benefit the city of Omaha.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>f</sup> Individuals who earn a salary purchase a wide range of goods and services, and a ripple effect is created as this spending is filtered throughout the economy in subsequent rounds of economic activity. This is called the multiplier effect. A multiplier of 2.0 is commonly used in economic impact analyses. In other words, for every \$1 earned by an individual, a total of \$2 in spending is generated in the economy.



The aggregate costs estimated above will be repeated for *each and every class* of dropouts, and so will be multiplied over time. These costs not only will represent an enormous drain on public budgets, they also will draw resources away from investments that otherwise could be made to improve Omaha's schools, infrastructure, parks, and other facilities and programs that raise the quality of life for all of the city's residents.

Keeping students in school through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade also is the threshold condition for helping them become productive members of society. The goals are to get all students to graduate prepared for the world of work and further education and to have the vast majority of Omaha's youth continue formal development of their skills in postsecondary education.

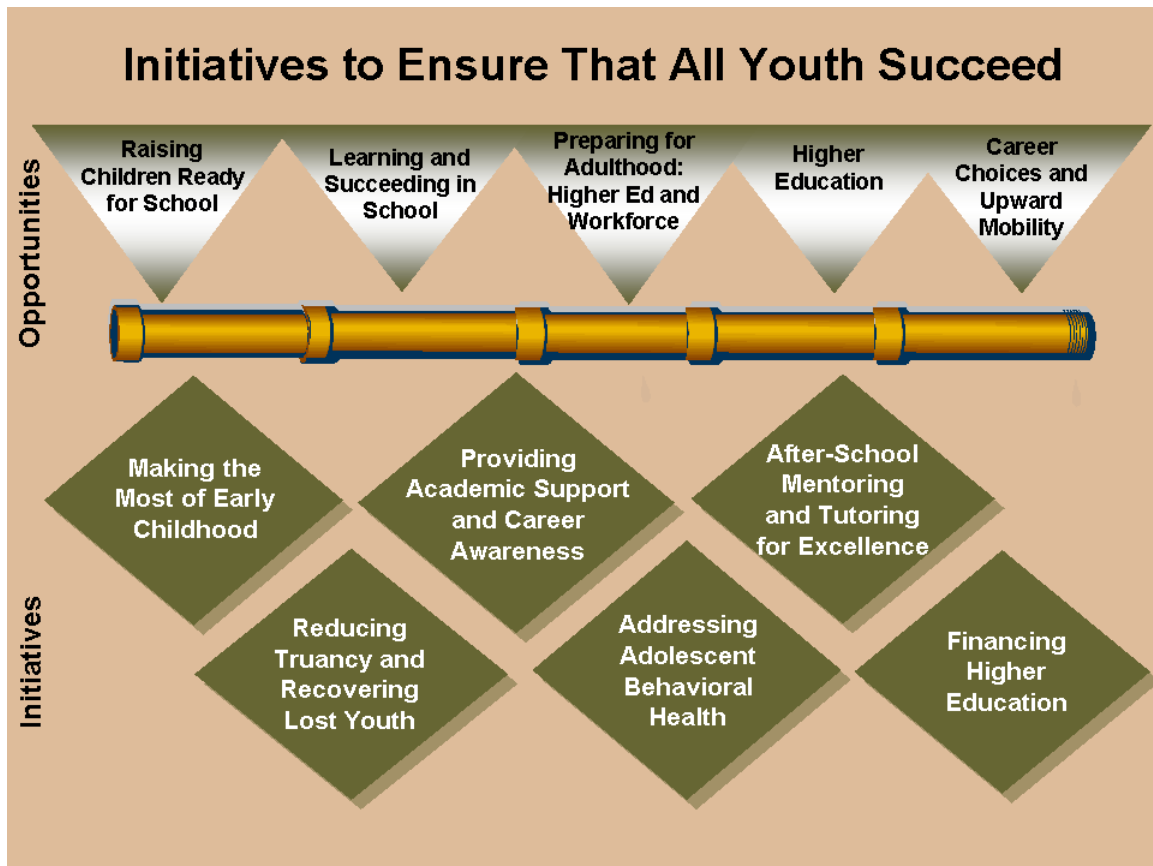
Can Omaha afford not to address the growing problem of dropouts and underachievement? The answer is yes, if the city is willing to pay for the growing expenses associated with the negative outcomes of at-risk youth who are lost. Yes, if the community is willing to allow an increasing gulf of disparity between the advantaged and those who were left behind. And yes, if Omaha does not seek to develop a workforce that can fuel the city's capacity to serve as a home for world-class business.

Alternatively, if Omaha is not willing to assume these economic and social costs, it has ample justification to support an unprecedented effort to transform at-risk youth into productive citizens whose aspirations can be fulfilled and whose contributions can be harnessed to make Omaha better. Such an approach would also serve as a powerful model for other cities seeking to make the most of their citizens' lives and their communities' futures.

# Initiatives to Ensure That All Youth Succeed

*Omaha's leadership is committed to ensuring that all youth will receive the education, training, and support needed to enable and motivate them to seize economic opportunities and achieve a productive future.*

As a first step toward making this vision of success a reality, staff from SRI International interviewed community leaders, brought together groups of youth, inventoried community resources, reviewed data on community needs, and searched for exemplary programs. The goal was to identify a limited set of highly leveraged initiatives that could build on the considerable resources already in place in the community while addressing gaps in the services needed for all Omaha youth to succeed. The proposed initiatives are meant to plug potential holes in the pipeline of youth development and academic success, beginning with making the most of early childhood by strengthening child care and continuing through early adulthood by providing financial support for students to pursue higher education.



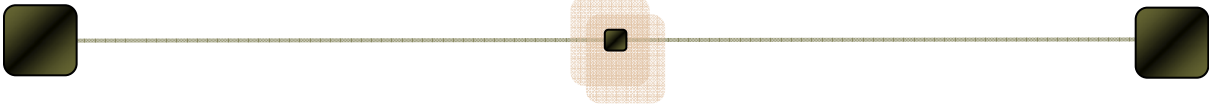
These are the specific initiatives:

***Making the Most of Early Childhood*** to ensure that all low-income children in Omaha receive high-quality care from birth through kindergarten that prepares them for school.

***Providing Academic Support and Career Awareness*** for all students to ensure that they move through the K-12 system successfully and graduate ready to pursue a career or advanced education.

***After-School Mentoring and Tutoring for Excellence*** to ensure that all vulnerable youth receive high-quality programs and services and have access to a mentor or professional to assist them in getting the services they need.

***Reducing Truancy and Recovering Lost Youth*** to keep youth in school with effective truancy abatement programs and to reconnect youth offenders back into school by providing individualized case management or mentoring and wraparound



services so that all students have a chance to succeed academically and pursue further education.

***Addressing Adolescent Behavioral Health*** by providing better mental health and substance abuse support services to youth and their families, including crisis intervention and support.

***Financing Higher Education*** to provide Omaha's graduating seniors with the resources to continue their education after high school at technical and professional schools, colleges, and universities.

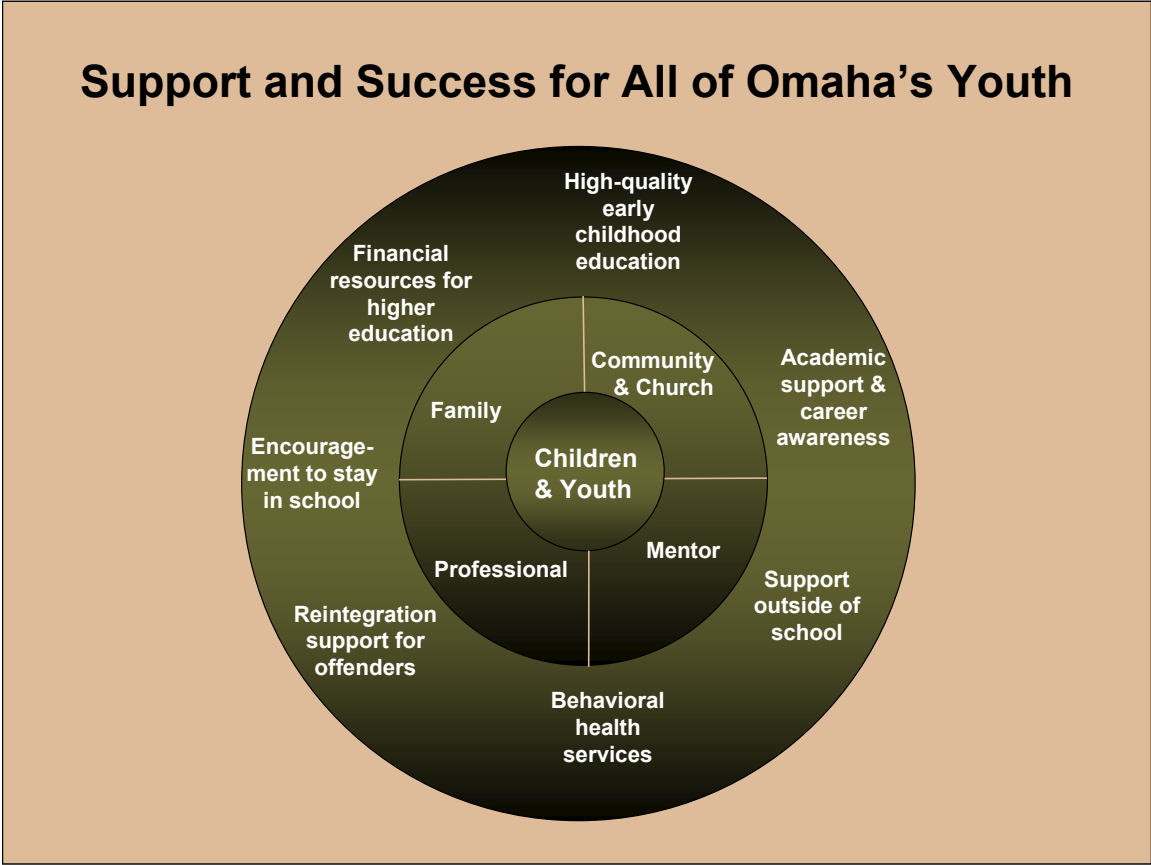
These six initiatives are directed at addressing specific gaps in the current set of services offered to Omaha youth. Each addresses a different aspect of the systems that are designed to prepare and support youth. At the same time, four themes run through the six initiatives. These cross-cutting themes are:

***Improving information systems.*** Policymakers need timely and accurate data with which to make decisions about allocating scarce resources. Practitioners need access to information about youth to serve them effectively. Funders need information about the results of their investments. Throughout these initiatives, you will see a call for better data systems within and across public schools, youth development organizations, and the juvenile justice system. Ideally, these organizations could share the same data system.

***Building on and leveraging existing capacity.*** Omaha is blessed with many institutions and individuals already committed to working on the challenges raised in this document. It makes no sense to reinvent efforts that are already under way. Each initiative describes the ongoing efforts on which it can build.

***Coordinating across agencies and service providers.*** There are many institutions, organizations, and service providers with different funding sources and varying specialty areas. But the youth they target are whole children whose needs do not readily fall into distinct categories. Wherever possible, agencies should coordinate their efforts with one another to ensure that the whole child is being served. Sharing a data system would facilitate such coordination.

**Ensuring that all youth have access to mentors and professional counselors.** The core premise of all the initiatives is that all youth should be able to stay in the pipeline to success. To ensure that this happens, families, communities, and churches have the central role of supporting youth. In addition, youth need the advice of competent mentors and professional counselors who can assess their needs and make sure they get access to needed services. The initiatives stress the need for such professionals, who could be located in many different agencies.



The remainder of this section describes each of the initiatives in greater detail. For each, it defines the scope of the problem the initiative is meant to address, identifies the existing relevant resources in Omaha, and describes strategic priorities—more specific areas for potential actions. As outlined in Section 3 of this document, Task Forces will be formed to address each of the initiative areas. These Task Forces will be charged with developing specific action steps to make real the vision of an Omaha in which all young people can succeed.



A word on cost estimates is in order. Each Task Force will be required to produce detailed program cost estimates. Developing cost estimates to reflect specific program design features and the scale of the effort to be undertaken will be a critical Task Force activity.

## Making the Most of Early Childhood

*The early childhood years set the stage for later success in school and life, but at-risk children are less likely to receive the supports they need to prepare them for success. Investments in high-quality early childhood education pay off: \$1 invested yields \$4 in return. Omaha has some excellent early childhood programs, yet too few children in Omaha have access to high-quality care. Moreover, too few caregivers have access to high-quality training. The strategic priorities include (1) ensuring that all children eligible for Head Start receive high-quality care and (2) expanding education and training opportunities for providers.*

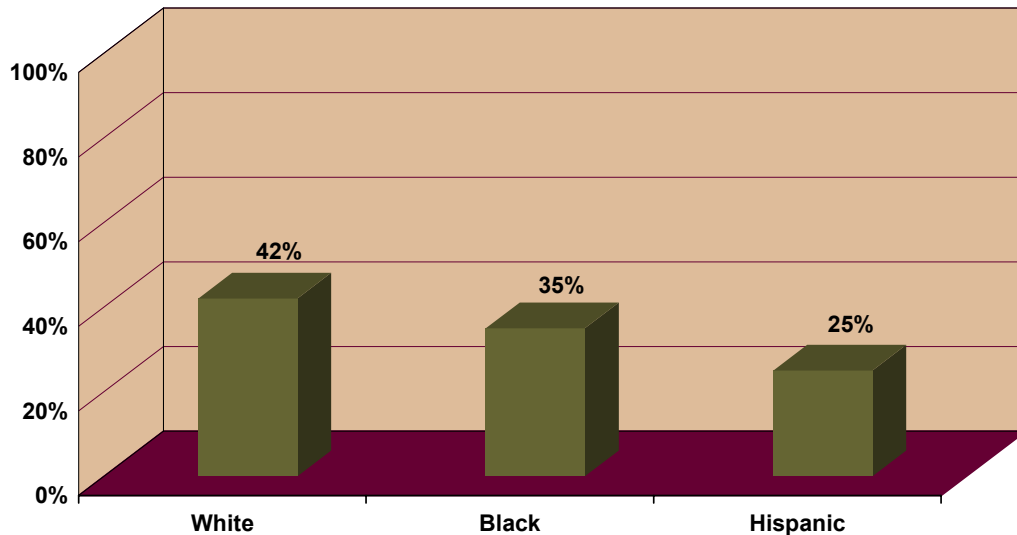
### Scope of the Challenge

*The early years determine many of life's outcomes, and at-risk children are less likely to receive the supports they need to succeed.*

How well students perform in school and their chances for success later in life are heavily influenced by their learning experiences in early childhood. Extensive research about early child development in the neurobiological, behavioral, and social sciences has concluded that the early years of life are critical for setting the stage for long-term favorable or unfavorable developmental outcomes for children.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, children from low-income and ethnic minority families are more likely than other children to have experiences in their early years that do not adequately prepare them for school. In fact, they are likely to have cognitive, language, social, or behavioral deficits that lead to school failure.<sup>7</sup> These children enter school academically behind their peers—19 months to 2 years behind—thus beginning the “achievement gap” that often remains throughout their school careers. Some studies show that at least half of the achievement gaps documented in school-age children already existed when the children entered kindergarten.<sup>8</sup>

## U.S. Children Ages 3 to 5 with Adequate School Readiness Skills, by Ethnicity



Source: Reproduced from Chandler, K., Nord, C.W., Lennon, J., & Liu, B. (1999). *Home literacy activities and signs of children's emerging literacy, 1993 and 1999*. Table 2. National Center for Education Statistics. November 1999. Based on National Household Education Survey, 1993 and 1999 analysis.

*Investment in early childhood education pays off for an entire lifetime.*

Fortunately, high-quality early childhood education can radically improve youngsters' lifetime chances. Numerous studies have followed children from their early years through school and into adulthood. These longitudinal studies have shown lasting effects from high-quality early childhood education programs. For example, children who receive high-quality child care demonstrate

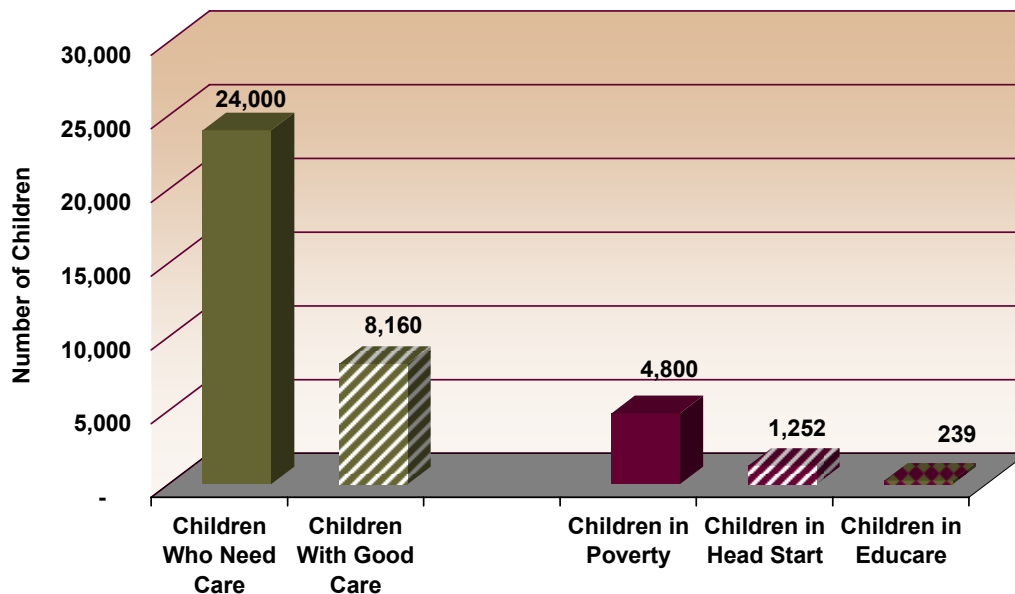
- less grade retention;
- less need for special education services;
- lower dropout rates;
- less child abuse or neglect;
- lower rates of teenage pregnancy;
- less criminal behavior; and
- less reliance on welfare as adults.

These benefits translate into a return of at least \$4 for every \$1 invested in early childhood education.<sup>9</sup>


**Yet, too few children in Omaha have access to high-quality early childhood education.**

Approximately 24,000 children under the age of 5 in Douglas County have working mothers. According to some estimates, nearly two-thirds of these children may have access to only minimal or poor-quality care. The numbers are even worse for poor children. Only 1,252 of the 4,800 children in poverty under the age of 5 in Douglas County receive services through the federally sponsored Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Head Start is a comprehensive federally funded child development program for low-income families. It provides health, nutrition, parent education, and social services, as well as preschool education. Early Head Start serves pregnant women, infants, and toddlers. Of these 1,252 children, 239 are served through Educare, a research-based program offering comprehensive support to students and their families with a highly qualified staff.

### Children and Child Care in Omaha



Sources: Edwards, C., Knoche, L., Raikes, H. A., Raikes, H. H., Torquati, J., & Wilcox, B. (2002). *Midwest Child Care Study: Child care characteristics and quality in Nebraska*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska; Voices for Children in Nebraska. (2005). *Kids Count in Nebraska 2005*. Omaha, NE: Author.



***Qualified teachers are key to high-quality early childhood education, but providers in Omaha do not have enough opportunities to increase their qualifications.***

The single most important factor in determining the quality of a child's educational experience is the quality of the teacher. Research shows that children have better outcomes with teachers who:

- Have more education and training.
- Are well paid.
- Are in programs with lower staff turnover.
- Demonstrate high-quality interactions with children.<sup>10</sup>

Simply put, child care providers do not enjoy a level of professional status commensurate with the importance of their work. The average annual salary for child care providers is \$14,700, compared with \$17,024 for Head Start teachers.<sup>11</sup> Such wage levels do not attract the most highly qualified staff. In fact, only 50 percent of child care providers in Omaha have bachelor's degrees.<sup>12</sup>

With low wages comes staff turnover. A teacher in Head Start could nearly double her salary by moving up to kindergarten; for many, such an increase proves to be irresistible. A recent study on early education in Omaha suggests that as many as a third of the staff turn over in some child care centers each year.<sup>13</sup> Turnover obviously erodes continuity of care for children, but it also wastes resources invested in the training of staff, further undermining the quality of care.

Salaries, training, and turnover vary across child care providers. Family-based care providers typically have the lowest educational attainment and levels of training and are often the lowest paid. In contrast, in Educare, every classroom has a teacher with at least a bachelor's degree.

Average Annual Salaries of Child Care, Head Start, Preschool, Kindergarten, and Elementary Teachers in Nebraska				
Child Care Providers	Head Start Teachers	Preschool Teachers	Kindergarten Teachers	Elementary Teachers
\$14,700	\$17,024	\$17,330	\$30,170	\$36,236
Source: Midwest Child Care Research Consortium, 2002.				

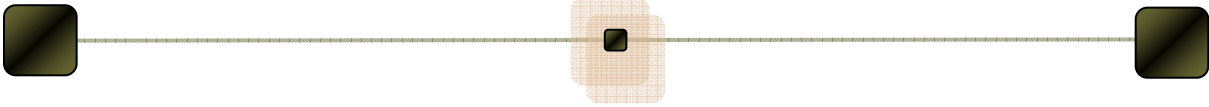
***Parents play a central role in early child development.***

As important as qualified preschool teachers are, parents remain the most important teachers of young children. Parents’ interactions with and care for their children are key to school readiness. However, low-income parents may not engage in the types of activities that stimulate children’s language, social, emotional, physical, or cognitive development.<sup>14</sup>

Some parent education programs have been tested through rigorous research and are proven to be effective. One example is The Incredible Years—a comprehensive program that helps parents change their behavior with their children to develop their children’s strengths and reduce behavior problems.<sup>15</sup> If adopted in Omaha, such programs could help low-income parents to prepare their children for school. Yet, in Omaha, parent education resources are available to only a small percentage of parents of children in poverty through Head Start or Educare.

***Community Resources to Address Early Childhood Needs in Omaha***

Nebraska has made it a statewide priority to improve the availability and quality of early childhood education. In addition to state initiatives that promote school readiness through pre-K education, Omaha is fortunate to have a variety of excellent resources in the early childhood education field. Omaha has a number of training and educational agencies, and it has a model program in Educare that serves as an excellent example for other programs. However, these resources are not coordinated and are not fully funded to address the scope of the challenge of providing widespread access to high-quality care.



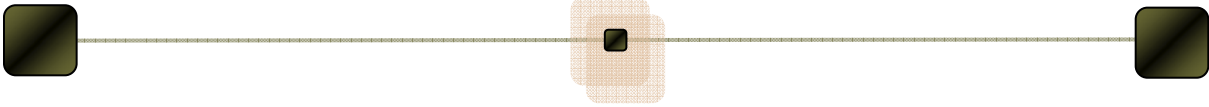
Key resources in Omaha include:

**Early Childhood Training Center (ECTC)** is a statewide project that provides services to support the professional development of early care and education staff. Located in Omaha, the Center offers a variety of workshops and conferences, independent study, study teams, consultation, mentoring, and classes for credit. The Center is a service of the Nebraska Department of Education, Offices of Early Childhood and Special Populations, and is administered by Educational Service Unit 3. Additional funding support is provided by the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, other state agencies, federal grants, public-private partnerships, and fees for service. In collaboration with the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium located at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, ECTC is implementing the Quality Rating System Pilot Project in Nebraska, a statewide strategy aimed at increasing the quality of care in early care and education settings.

**Nebraska Association for the Education of Young Children** is a state affiliate of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. This statewide program operates the T.E.A.C.H. (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) project, supports child care programs in becoming accredited, and collaborates with other early childhood agencies in improving the quality of care and education for young children in Nebraska through the Quality Enhancement Pilot Project.

**Educare** provides year-round, comprehensive, center-based developmental child care, education, and related services to children from birth to age 5. It is widely considered to be a model program. Each classroom has a lead teacher with a bachelor's degree, an assistant teacher with an associate's degree, and a teacher's aide with a high school diploma. All have completed coursework in early childhood education. A master teacher provides on-site supervision, mentoring, and training. The Educare model fuses federal (Head Start), local (OPS), and private funds.

**Head Start and Early Head Start** serve approximately 1,013 children from birth to age 5 through 17 OPS grantee sites. Head Start offers services from late August to May, following the OPS calendar. Children are eligible for either part- or full-day services,



depending on parents' work and school commitments and income eligibility. An additional 239 children are served with Head Start and Early Head Start funds in Educare, for a total of 1,252 children served with Head Start funds.


**Omaha Public Schools** has a number of pre-kindergarten classrooms throughout the district's elementary schools. OPS reports that 1,437 students were enrolled in pre-K in fall 2006. The Nebraska Department of Education Early Childhood Special Education programs also provide education and services to students with special needs. Home-based services are available for children from birth to age 3.

**Nebraska Children and Families Foundation** is involved in many efforts that support early childhood, including Learning from Day One, Nebraska's statewide public awareness initiative to promote positive outcomes for young children.

**United Way of the Midlands** is the local lead for the Born Learning campaign (Nebraska Children and Families Foundation is the state lead), which is a 1-year media campaign to promote early literacy. United Way cosponsored a community event with Educare that 320 parents and caregivers attended. United Way also funds early childhood programs through its "Success by 6" early learning community impact initiative and a still-evolving early childhood initiative.

**Munroe-Meyer Institute, Department of Education and Child Development**, provides evaluation and intervention services for children from birth to age 12 who have disabilities and other special needs. The Institute has also been involved in providing training to improve child care quality in Omaha.

State initiatives and funding sources include the **Child Care Block Grant** and the **Early Childhood Education Endowment**. Child Care Block Grant funds are distributed through the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services. Early Head Start, Head Start, Educare, and other child care centers receive Child Care Block Grant funds. The Child Care Block Grant also partially funds the T.E.A.C.H. project. Endorsed by voters in November 2006, Amendment 5 created the Early Childhood Education Endowment, a combination of state educational funds and private donations. It is estimated that the endowment will have \$1 million



in grants to allocate beginning in June 2007. Grants will be awarded to school districts, educational service units, and programs serving children from birth to age 5. Grantees will need to match the award they receive from the state fund.

## ***Strategic Priorities***

Building on the base of services and initiatives already present in Omaha, we recommend the establishment of a *Making the Most of Early Childhood Task Force*, with the following goals:

- Expanding the availability of high-quality child care for children in poverty.
- Strengthening the child care workforce.
- Improving the availability and quality of parent education programs.

Options for achieving these goals include the following:

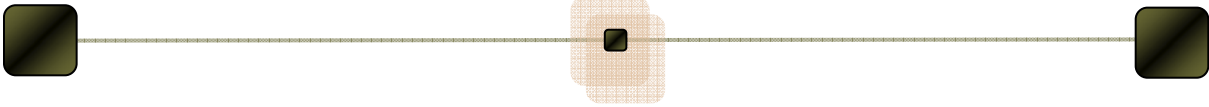
**Ensure that all children eligible for Head Start receive high-quality early care and education.**

The 4,800 children eligible for Head Start are in the greatest need of high-quality care. These are the children who are most likely to arrive at school unprepared for learning and who will have the highest probability of dropping out of the school system. Serving these students will require expansion of high-quality early childhood educational services such as those provided through Head Start and Educare. Such an expansion would not only serve more children, it would also provide a training ground for many more professionals in the community. These efforts will require a significant expansion of Educare and Head Start funding.

**Expand education and training opportunities for child care providers.**

Beyond the expansion of Educare and Head Start, child care can be enhanced by improving the skills and knowledge of professionals already in the field, including:

- Funding scholarships for tuition or books, release time from work, bonuses, and travel to participate in T.E.A.C.H.

- 
- Providing additional resources for the Quality Enhancement Pilot Project, which provides mentors and coaches to help improve classroom quality and content.
  - Expanding intensive and ongoing community-based training (by the Early Childhood Training Center and others) and making it free to providers.
  - Developing sequenced training and educational credit transfer between 2-year and 4-year institutions to make it easier for teachers to pursue a bachelor's degree.

#### **Monitor the quality of child care in Omaha.**


The Task Force should consider implementing the state's Quality Rating System on an accelerated basis to rate child care quality and enable high-quality programs and providers to receive higher child care reimbursement rates.

#### **Implement a proven parent education program.**

Programs such as The Incredible Years can be put in place in child care centers or other community sites to educate parents about their roles and responsibilities and suggest activities to raise mentally and physically healthy children who will be ready for school.

#### **Explore the potential for a community-wide effort to offer employee benefit packages to child care providers.**

A key reason that a career in child care is not an attractive option for better-educated young people is the lack of benefits in most family-based care and many centers. The Task Force could consider how to create an employee benefit package pool that providers and centers can join to obtain low-cost employee benefits.



## Providing Academic Support and Career Awareness

*Overall, Omaha students perform well academically. But serious problems persist: achievement declines precipitously during elementary school; major gaps exist between the achievement of advantaged and disadvantaged students; dropout rates are far too high; and many staying in school are not prepared for college and the world of work. Currently, the education community in Omaha is poised to take on these challenges. The strategic priorities should include early intervention for struggling students, development and implementation of a common data system, and strengthening career pathways.*

### **Scope of the Challenge**

*Mastery of core academic skills is imperative to students' future success, and the majority of Omaha students are demonstrating proficiency.*

For Omaha's youth to become productive members of the future workforce, they will need to master core foundation skills in school and graduate from high school ready for postsecondary education and training. Failure to master basic reading and math skills in elementary school is a major obstacle to staying on track for college and career.

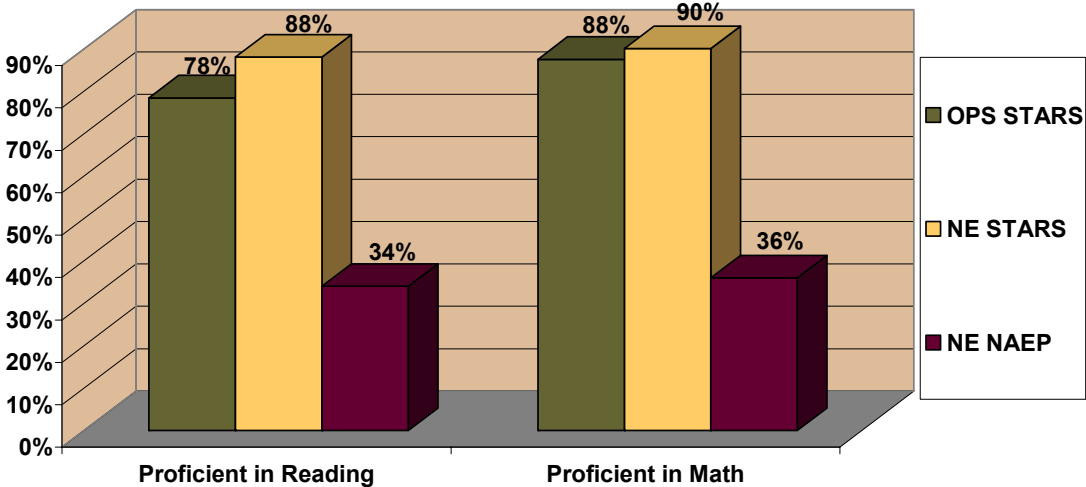
Overall, Omaha schools appear to be performing well in teaching children basic reading and mathematics. Results on the Nebraska School-based Teacher-led Assessment and Reporting System (STARS) over the past several years show that the vast majority of students are "proficient," meaning they have mastered reading and mathematics skills at the levels defined by district and state standards. In fact, in 2005-06, nearly 80 percent of 4<sup>th</sup>-grade students scored proficient in reading on STARS, and nearly 90 percent scored proficient in mathematics.

Students in the Omaha Public Schools also take nationally normed tests in which each child's performance is measured against the national population, not specific standards. On these tests, the California Achievement Tests (CAT), Omaha students' results are respectable, ranging across grade and subject from a high of nearly the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile (meaning that OPS students score nearly at or above the level of 80 percent of the population) to lows in the 40<sup>th</sup> to 50<sup>th</sup> percentile range.

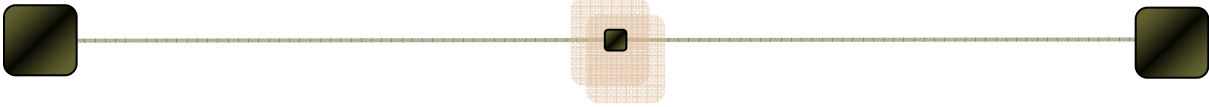
*Respectable test scores do not mean that all Omaha students are prepared to meet exacting national standards.*

Although results on the tests used in Nebraska to measure achievement on core skills show Omaha schools performing well, there is evidence to suggest that Nebraska, like many other states, does not hold students to the same expectations as national assessments. When comparing results for OPS and the state of Nebraska overall on the test on state standards (STARS) with results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), overall state level and OPS scores are similar. The overwhelming majority of students meet standards (88 percent of

**Grade 4 Student Achievement in Reading and Math:  
Comparison of 2005 STARS and NAEP Results**



Sources: Omaha Public Schools; Perie, M., Grigg, W., & Donahue, P. (2005). *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2005* (NCES 2006-451). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; Perie, M., Grigg, W., & Dion, G. (2005). *The Nation's Report Card: Mathematics 2005* (NCES 2006-451). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.



Nebraska students and 78 percent of OPS students, for example, in reading in 4<sup>th</sup> grade in 2005). However, results on NAEP for the same year indicated that just 34 percent of 4<sup>th</sup> graders in public schools in Nebraska were reading at or above the proficient level.<sup>16</sup> There are similar discrepancies between STARS and NAEP results for 4<sup>th</sup>-grade mathematics.<sup>17</sup>

These discrepancies do not mean that students in Nebraska and OPS are failing. In fact, Nebraska students perform well on NAEP relative to students in other states. These data simply suggest that when educators raise the bar for what it means to be “proficient,” fewer students meet the stricter criteria.

***Omaha student achievement in core skills declines from elementary to middle school.***

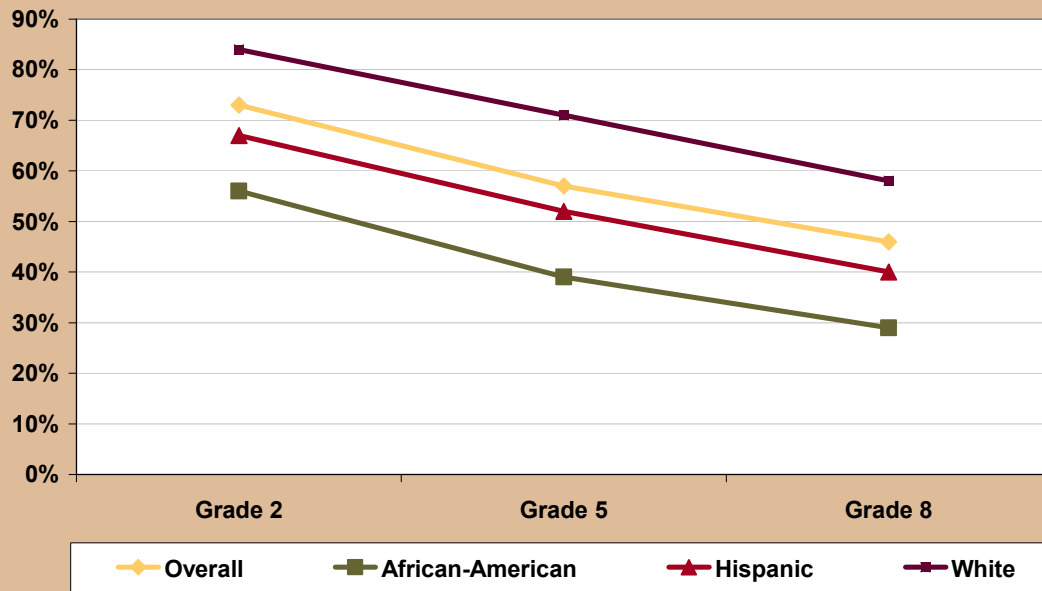
Relative to their peers nationally, Omaha students perform much more poorly at the end of 8<sup>th</sup> grade than they do at the beginning of elementary school. Evidence from results on a nationally normed test suggests that student performance is dropping off during the elementary school years. Math achievement in OPS shows a persistent pattern of decline relative to national achievement averages across grade levels. Results on the CAT administered to OPS students over the last several years show a pattern of declining average math achievement levels. The average CAT math score for all OPS students in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade in 2005-06 was in the 73<sup>rd</sup> percentile, while the overall OPS average score for all 8<sup>th</sup> graders had slipped to the 46<sup>th</sup> percentile.

***Overall achievement results mask differences across racial and ethnic groups.***

As is often the case, when overall achievement test results are broken out by race and ethnicity, the scores of white students are consistently higher than those of African-American and Hispanic students. Results on the 2<sup>nd</sup>-grade CAT test for math show white, African-American, and Hispanic students all scoring above the national average. By 8<sup>th</sup> grade, however, only white students are scoring above the national average. Performance by African-American students on the 8<sup>th</sup>-grade math test has dropped to the 29<sup>th</sup> percentile, and performance by Hispanic students has dropped to the 40<sup>th</sup> percentile.



### Omaha Public Schools 2005-06 California Achievement Test Math Results (National Percentile Ranks)

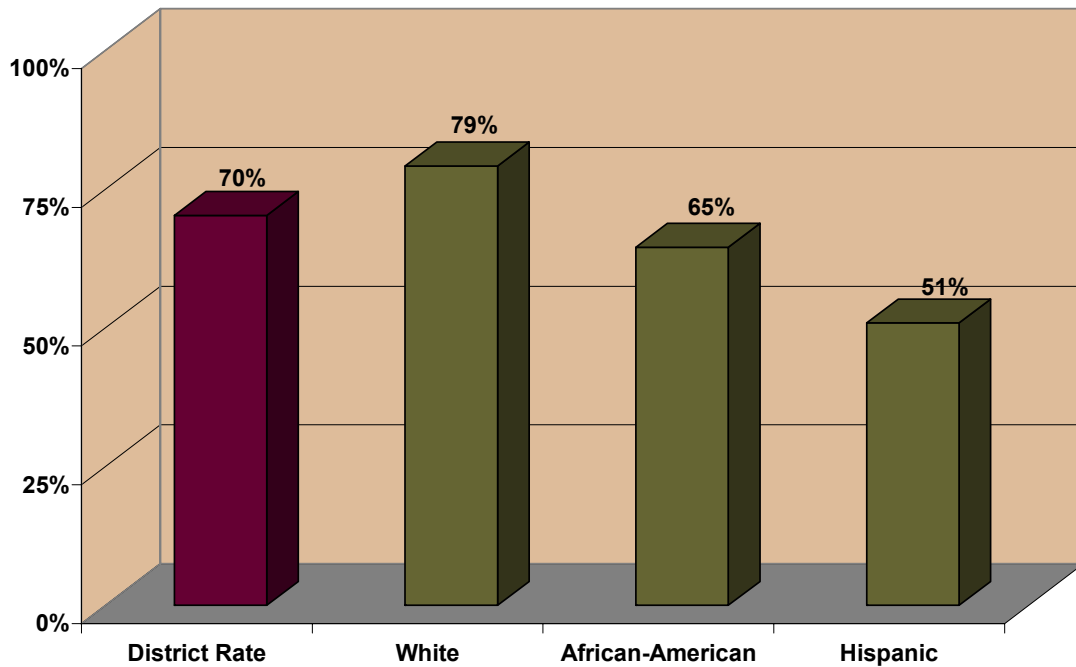


Source: Omaha Public Schools.

### *Entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade underprepared increases the prospects of dropping out.*

Youth who enter high school unprepared for the rigors of academic work are at increased risk of dropping out of school. If entering students have not acquired many of the basic skills in literacy and mathematics, they may be unable to adapt to the increased demands of high school. Lack of readiness for high school work and its linkage to the increased risk of dropping out of high school may partly explain the disproportionate number of youth from ethnic minorities who end up dropping out of school. In OPS, according to data from 2005-06, Hispanic students have the lowest graduation rates, followed by African-Americans and whites. In fact, 35 percent of African-Americans and a startling 49 percent of Latino students—the fastest-growing segment of Omaha’s population—dropped out of high school during this period.

### OPS High School 4-Year Graduation Rates, 2005-06



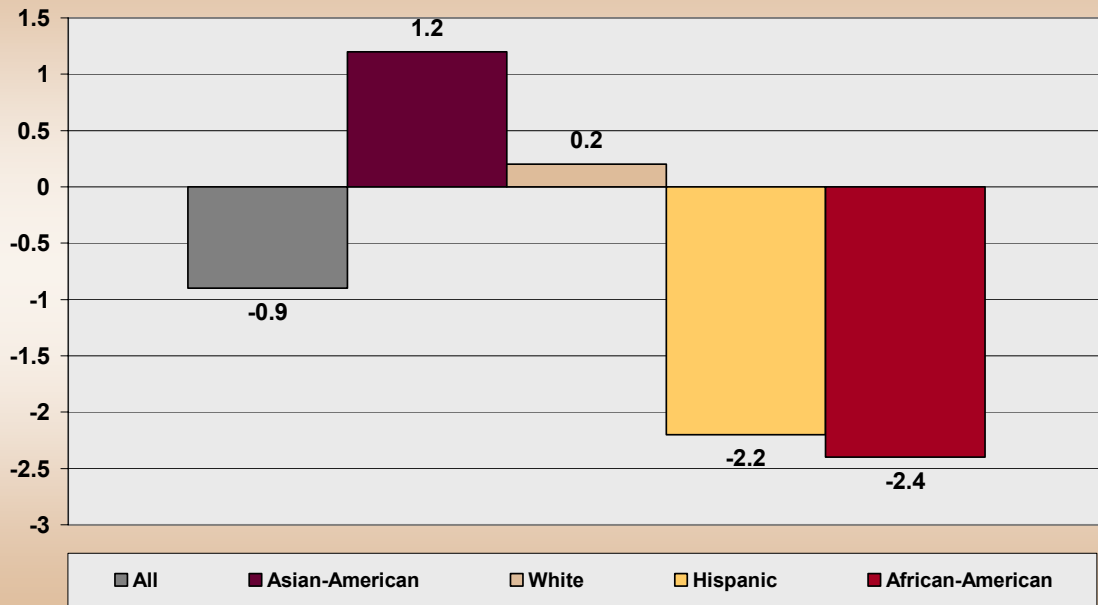
Source: Omaha Public Schools.

*Even those who stay in school may not be fully prepared for college and career.*

Many youth graduate from high school and still lack sufficient mastery of core skills to effectively pursue either postsecondary education or employment. ACT has developed benchmarks for college and career readiness in several core skill areas. As for much of the nation, only white and Asian-American students in OPS scored above the benchmark for college and career readiness on ACT's PLAN Reading Test. No group of students in OPS had an average score above the PLAN math benchmark level for college and career readiness.<sup>18</sup>

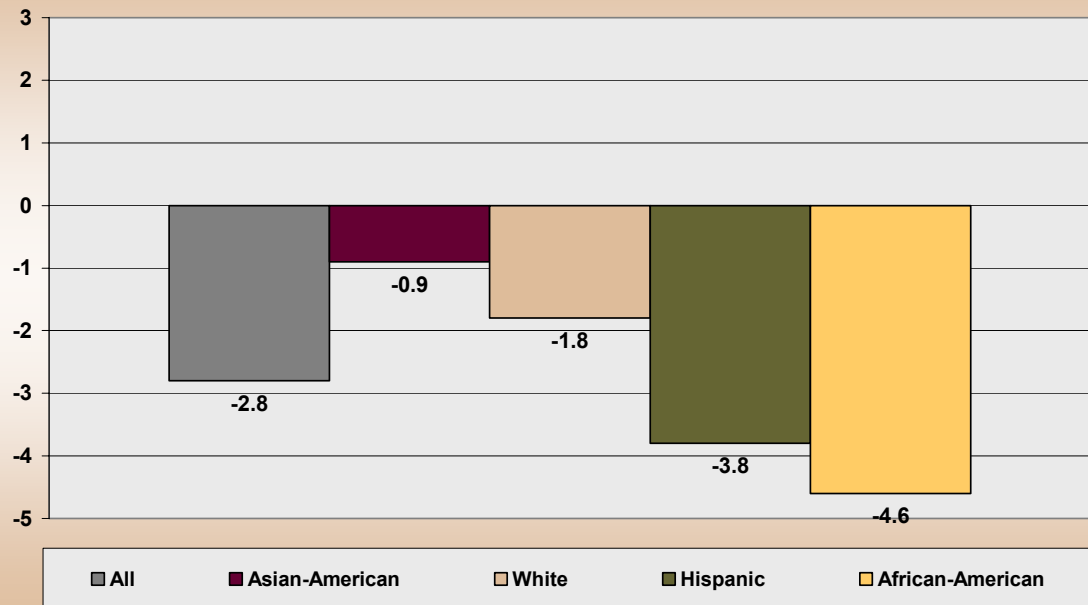


### OPS Grade 10 ACT PLAN Performance Relative to College Readiness Benchmarks for Reading



Source: Omaha Public Schools.

### OPS Grade 10 ACT PLAN Performance Relative to College Readiness Benchmarks for Math



Source: Omaha Public Schools.



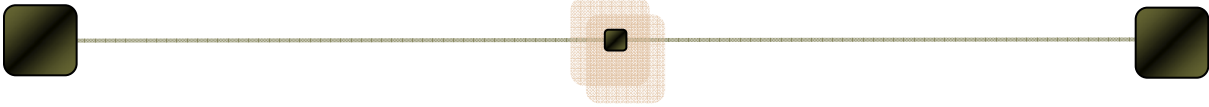
## ***Community Resources to Support Academic Success and Career Awareness in Omaha***

School districts, higher education institutions, local businesses, and many community organizations in metropolitan Omaha recognize the importance of preparing students for higher education and careers. They are aware of the vital interest they share in helping youth develop the knowledge and skills to pursue pathways that are well matched to opportunities for employment and career advancement in the local economy.

**Metro Districts.** OPS, along with most other districts in Douglas and Sarpy Counties, has embarked on a major effort to address common goals related to improving the educational opportunities of all children. Superintendents from OPS and other local school districts have proposed to improve data collection and sharing, provide greater educational choice and access, strengthen teacher training and incentives, and focus extra resources on the neediest students.

**Omaha Public Schools** already has numerous programs, both during the school day and after school, to meet its students' educational needs. These programs include a variety of supplemental programs for low-achieving students and career and technical education options. The OPS Career Center offers courses in 11 vocational areas (Auto Technology, Auto Collision, Broadcasting, Commercial Design, Construction Academy, Culinary Skills, eBusiness, Engine Repair/Welding, Health Occupations, Photography, Zoo Partnership). The OPS Career Center also offers a variety of online, independent study courses using computer labs at the center and in OPS high schools. These courses include a Credit Recovery High School program that gives students opportunities to make up course credits needed for graduation.

**Metro Community College** (MCC) has partnered with OPS on a number of initiatives. These initiatives include creating vocational course offerings in conjunction with the OPS Career Center and offering programs to help dropout students get back on track educationally and get access to needed social services. These programs include the MCC Career Academy and opportunities for students to simultaneously earn high school and college credits.



MCC also offers a GED certificate for approximately 1,000 students each year.

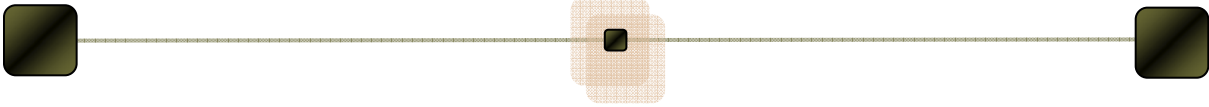
**University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO)** offers the unparalleled resources of a major research university. The Medical School offers a variety of outreach programs and internships. The College of Public Affairs and Community Service coordinates many efforts around the city to serve youth and families and has deep research and evaluation capacity. And, of course, the College of Education trains many area teachers and principals and is home to the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium.

**The Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce** hosts the Omaha 21<sup>st</sup> Century Steering Committee. This group is made up of business and education leaders in the Greater Omaha area and is designed to facilitate communication between education and business. Three subgroups have been created in the areas of student achievement, school to career, and higher/continuing education. Notably, the Student Achievement Subgroup has begun to develop an education index—a list of core performance indicators related to student progress and outcomes—that would support benchmarking of school districts across Omaha.

**The Winners Circle** is a school-based program designed to improve the academic achievement and citizenship of participating high-risk inner-city elementary school students. The program consists of individual goal setting for student progress in math, English, and citizenship; support from community volunteers (15 per school); monetary incentives to classrooms; and public recognition for successful students. The program serves 10 schools in North Omaha (nearly 4,000 students), all of which have test scores below the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile on state tests.

**Community organizations.** Other organizations in Omaha have also taken an active role in preparing youth for school and workplace success. Camp Fire USA, Girls Inc., Girls and Boys Town, Boys and Girls Clubs, and an Advisory Council consisting of Omaha area businesses are among the many community organizations already serving and supporting youth.

There is great potential to complement the solid efforts of OPS by harnessing these ongoing efforts to support youth in their progression through the K-12 pipeline and help them acquire the



skills and knowledge that will prepare them for postsecondary schooling and work opportunities.

## ***Strategic Priorities***

To supply the highly skilled workforce that the local economy will need for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more Omaha youth will need to succeed academically, complete high school ready for college, and be ready to take the first steps toward productive and viable career pathways. We recommend establishing the *Providing Academic Support and Career Awareness Task Force*, with the overarching goal of ensuring that all students progress through the K-12 system at a pace that allows them to graduate on time and prepares them for the workforce and further training. Specific strategic priorities for the Task Force might include providing early intervention for struggling students, developing and implementing a common data system, strengthening career and technical education, and communicating career opportunities.

### **Provide extended time for struggling learners in elementary schools.**

The data clearly show that OPS students fall behind their peers nationally during elementary school; falling behind can become an early diversion from the path to academic and career success. Recognizing that high schools inherit problems that have arisen earlier in the education pipeline, interventions need to start as early as possible. There is no more robust finding in educational research than the impact of time. Simply stated, the more time children spend studying a subject, the more they learn. The *Providing Academic Support and Career Awareness Task Force* can consider many strategies, from providing extended time during the school day for math and reading (used successfully in San Diego's Blueprint for Student Success in a Standards-Based System) to extending the school day, week, or even year (as has been done successfully in the national Knowledge Is Power Program). Such supplemental instructional interventions at the elementary and middle school levels can provide low-achieving students with the additional support, motivation, and opportunity to master basic reading and math skills. Administrators must consider the supports teachers will need to implement such reforms, including additional compensation.



### **Explore a Career Academy high school redesign strategy.**

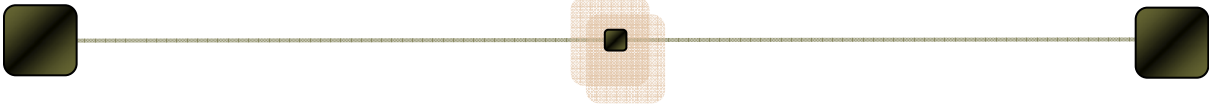
Career Academies are a highly effective high school reform model. They combine a rigorous academic curriculum with career and technical education in small learning communities within high schools. Building on existing strong relationships, local school districts, MCC, and 4-year colleges will need to work together with business and other community partners to create coherent and effective educational pathways to viable careers and to help students make progress toward their career goals. The Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, in collaboration with local schools, businesses, and public and private social service agencies, is currently considering the Career Academy Innovation Community model. This is a viable model for the community-wide collaboration that is needed. Again, additional support for teachers may be needed.

### **Ensure that all youth have access to a fully qualified professional counselor.**

All students should have access to a professional who can help them stay on track academically and get access to the emotional and academic support services they need. Some youth rely on school personnel such as guidance counselors for advice and direction, but guidance counselors often work with large numbers of students and are too often not available to provide more personalized attention. Counselors in middle school, for example, could identify youth in need of additional academic support in making the transition to high school. Increasing the number of qualified professional counselors in OPS middle schools and high schools would enable more youth to receive the supports they need to help them maintain their academic progress and their social and emotional development.

### **Develop and implement a common data system.**

Developing a student tracking system that provides stakeholders with access to useful and timely data must be a priority for the *Providing Academic Support and Career Awareness Task Force*. The goals for the data system would include more accurate needs assessment, sharing of data, and easy transfer of data as students move across district lines. Such an effort should be coordinated with the data system needs discussed in the strategic



priorities for the *After-School Mentoring and Tutoring for Excellence* and *Reducing Truancy and Recovering Lost Youth Task Forces*. The development of memoranda of understanding between OPS, other area districts, the Nebraska Department of Education, and local partners will be necessary to govern data sharing and confidentiality agreements. The effort should also build on the work already begun by the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce's Student Achievement Subgroup and some local school districts. There are two basic options for creating a common data system: customized development of new software or adoption of an existing software package. Adopting existing software, while relatively low cost, also would greatly limit the range and uses of data in the system.

**Communicate career opportunities and pathways.**

A public information and communication campaign should be developed to disseminate information on local career opportunities and the education and training requirements of entering and getting ahead in those career areas. This information could be packaged and distributed in ways that would help recruit and motivate disadvantaged students to pursue locally viable and important career pathways; enlist business and community sponsors to participate in mentoring, internship, and other support programs; and increase the visibility of and access to high school and college transition programs.

## After-School Mentoring and Tutoring for Excellence

*Too many children have no adult supervision after school, presenting a real danger to them as well as to society. Fortunately, Omaha has a wide array of after-school, community, and religious organizations that provide safe havens for thousands of youth every day. But more youth need services, and youth-serving organizations need additional financial and human resources to expand. The strategic priorities are to increase the number of at-risk youth who receive high-quality programs and services and to assign a mentor and professional counselor to every at-risk youth. Those adults will be responsible for monitoring youth's progress and ensuring that they have the supports they need to stay on a productive path.*

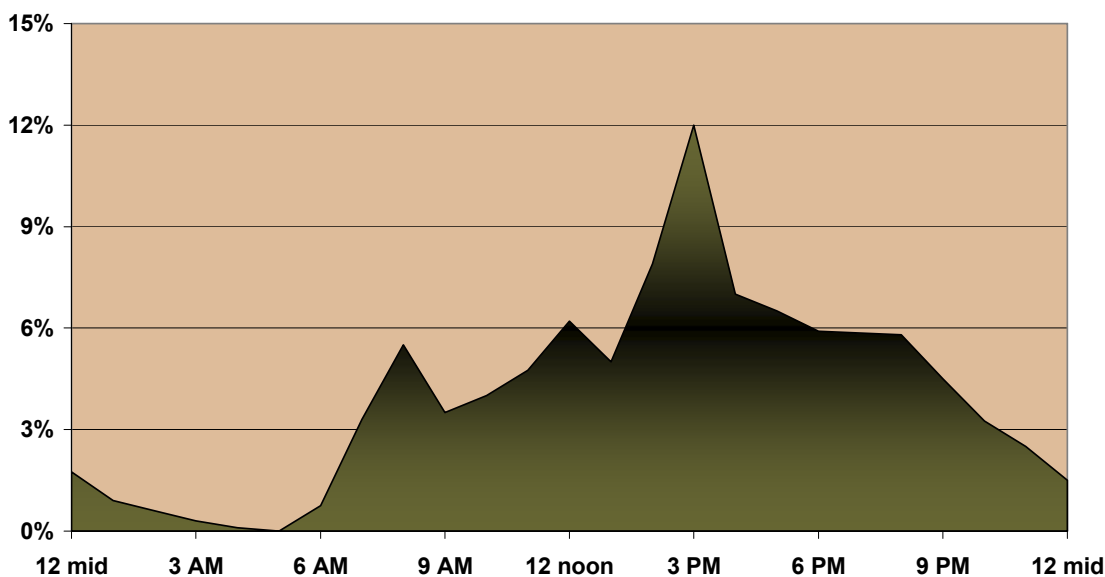
### Scope of the Challenge

*The after-school hours are dangerous.*

For juveniles everywhere, the after-school hours are fraught with peril. Many studies have shown that from 3 to 6 P.M., juveniles are most likely to perpetrate and become victims of violent crime; be in or cause a car crash; and smoke, drink, or use drugs. Nearly 60 percent of all youth gang-related crime occurs on school days, and almost all of that crime occurs in the hours immediately after school dismissal.<sup>19</sup> In fact, violent crimes committed by all juveniles spike at around 3 P.M. One expert from the national organization Fight Crime estimates that about 40 percent of all juvenile crimes are committed between 3 and 6 P.M. Using those averages and arrest data from the Omaha Police Department would mean that more than 1,400 juvenile crimes were committed during these hours in Omaha in 2005.

OPS Grade 10 ACT PLAN College Readiness Benchmarks for Reading

### Serious Violent Crime\* Committed in the United States by Juveniles on School Days, by Hour



\*Murder, violent sexual assaults, robbery, and aggravated assault.  
Source: Fox, J. A. (2003). *Time of day for youth violence (ages 10-17), 1999*. Boston: Northeastern University.  
Adapted from 1999 national Incident-Based Reporting System data.

These risks are far greater for youth who are not under adult supervision. In Nebraska, 31 percent of K-12 youth are responsible for their own care after school;<sup>20</sup> for the Omaha Public Schools population, this percentage translates to more than 14,000 youth who are unsupervised after school every day.

#### *Youth need supervision and guidance.*

The personal and social costs associated with allowing youth to go unsupervised are great. For example, nationwide, teens who are unsupervised after school are 37 percent more likely to become teen parents.<sup>21</sup> In Omaha, teen pregnancy remains a major issue.

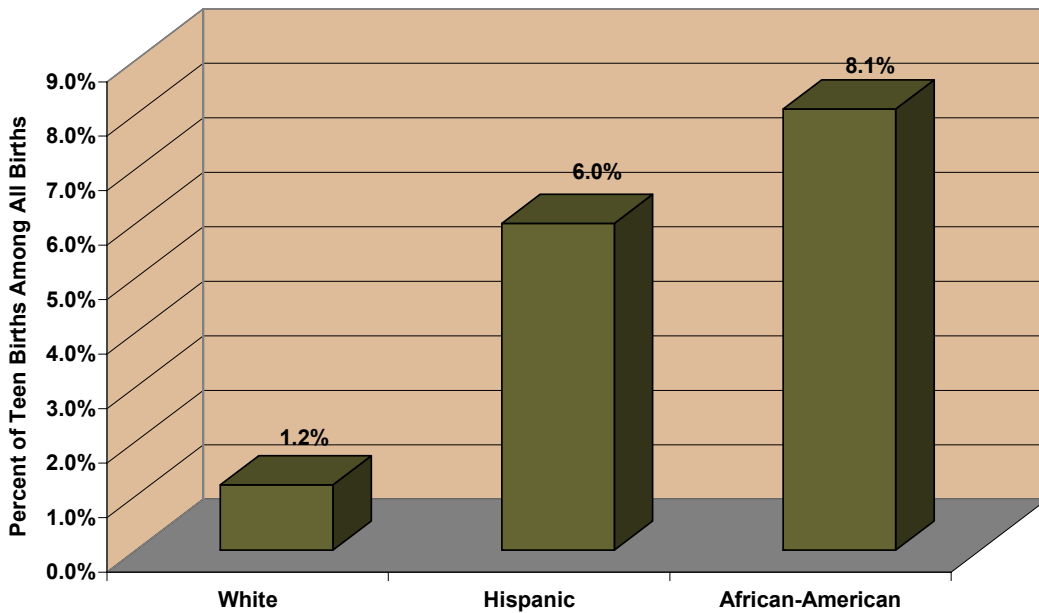
Numerous studies have shown that unsupervised children are also more likely to

- be truant from school;
- experience stress;
- earn poor grades; and

- engage in risky behaviors, such as experimentation with alcohol and drugs.

These behaviors threaten the healthy development of youth and can prevent them from achieving their full potential and productively contributing to society.

**Teen Births in Douglas County, by Race/Ethnicity**



Source: Douglas County Health Department, Birth Records 2004.

Fortunately, the presence of a stable, caring adult can make a difference. For example, youth ages 10 to 16 who have a relationship with a mentor are 46 percent less likely to start using drugs and 27 percent less likely to start drinking alcohol.<sup>22</sup> In addition, one study in Illinois showed that fewer housing units were vandalized in low-income housing projects that had Boys and Girls Clubs.

## Vandalism Rates With and Without Boys and Girls Clubs



Source: <http://www.fightcrime.org/reports/ILASReportWendnotes.pdf>.

Interviews with dozens of youth, community leaders, and youth-service providers in Omaha revealed that the primary challenges facing youth in Omaha relate to a lack of adult supervision. According to those groups, the biggest challenges are

- gang violence;
- sexually transmitted diseases; and
- an overall lack of parental guidance.

The youth themselves expressed the greatest distress about the paucity of adult supervision. One 14-year-old female in the Juvenile Detention Center said her life was on the right track until she felt that her parents no longer cared about her. Then, she said, "I started skipping school and stuff." The end result was her arrest and detention. Far and away, the greatest need identified by the youth interviewed for this study was for a greater number of caring adults who will listen to them and help with their problems.



*Vulnerable youth require additional supports.*

The data presented above reveal a great need for guidance, structure, supervision, and positive role models for Omaha's youth, especially during the after-school hours. Like youth everywhere, Omaha's young people have some basic needs critical to their survival and healthy development. According to youth development experts, those needs include

- safety and structure;
- belonging and membership;
- self-worth and an ability to contribute;
- independence and control over one's life;
- closeness and several good relationships; and
- competence and mastery.

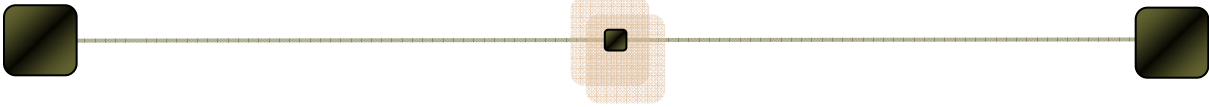
For many youth, home and school are the primary sources of these supports. Youth who live in poverty or in single-parent homes often have to seek those supports elsewhere, such as from a mentor, a youth development organization, or a religious institution.

In 2004, 16,018 children ages 0 to 17 were living in poverty in Douglas County, and 12,334 of those youth lived in single-parent households.<sup>23</sup> These figures represent a sizable population of youth who are in need of additional support, mentoring, and guidance to develop into healthy, productive adults.

*In Omaha, youth are served well, but more youth need services.*

Omaha's after-school programs and youth development and mentoring organizations play an important role in the lives of vulnerable youth (many of these organizations are listed in the following sections). Dozens of teenage youth unequivocally told the study team that without their youth organizations, they would be "on the streets," "in jail," or, even worse, "in a box" (in other words, dead).

Nearly every youth organization in Omaha is replete with success stories. These organizations affect a variety of short- and long-

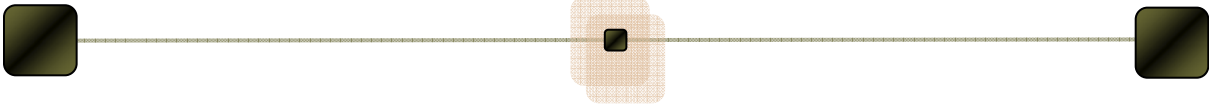


term outcomes for youth, including school attendance, achievement, self-esteem, and aspirations. Some examples of the impact of Omaha's youth-serving organizations include:

- In the 2005-06 school year, 80 percent of youth in one mentoring organization increased their school attendance, and 70 percent had fewer discipline referrals.
- 70 percent of youth surveyed in one youth development organization said the organization gave them the ability to avoid difficulty with the law.
- 80 percent of participants in one organization reported that the organization was doing a good job of preparing them for life as adults.
- A youth development organization that emphasizes abstinence reported only one teen pregnancy in the past 4 years, out of more than 1,000 teenage girls served.
- 80 percent of children involved in one youth development organization improved their grades in school and developed conflict resolution and violence prevention skills.
- One youth development organization increased its focus on reading, and participants' reading scores increased from 38 percent passing to 77 percent passing in just 5 months.
- A participant in one mentoring organization received the guidance, counseling, and financial support he needed to be the first in his family to earn a college degree and launch a successful career.

Every leader with whom the study team spoke said that the two most important ingredients of these successes are (1) the presence of stable, caring adults and (2) a long-term commitment to and involvement with youth. Indeed, most of the youth the team interviewed had been attending their respective youth organizations for at least 1 year, and many teenagers had been attending since the 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Most youth said they turn to someone from their youth organization with problems because the staff members know them well.

Despite the presence of several strong after-school, youth development, and mentoring programs, not all youth in need are being reached. As estimated earlier, some 14,000 youth who attend Omaha Public Schools are unsupervised after school every



day. And, according to some leaders, only 10 percent of at-risk youth participate in some kind of structured after-school activities. Youth and adults alike stressed the need for more positive outlets in Omaha. Perhaps the most striking case was one young man in the Youth Detention Center who said he was turned away from a youth organization because it was filled to capacity. That youth, along with many others in Omaha, would benefit from involvement with a mentor or in structured programs or activities.

### *Youth organizations face challenges to expanding.*

The leaders of Omaha's youth sector would like to serve more youth, but their physical, human, and financial capacities to do so are limited. Youth-serving organizations in Omaha, like their counterparts in other cities, face several challenges to delivering high-quality services. These challenges, as identified by the directors of Omaha's largest youth development and mentoring organizations, include

- shortages of qualified professionals;
- high turnover rates among staff;
- limited budgets for training and developing staff;
- difficulty raising money for operating costs; and
- concerns about sustaining grant-funded programs.

Another concern in Omaha, and across the country, is uneven program quality. Some local organizations adhere to national standards or guidelines for best practices, but many do not; no national set of quality standards even exists for youth development programming. Several representatives of Omaha's youth-serving organizations believe that having local standards could improve the quality of youth programming in Omaha as a whole. Other cities and regions have developed their own quality standards and could serve as a resource.

With its existing infrastructure of organizations with strong mentoring and youth programming, Omaha is uniquely well positioned to become a model for other cities to emulate. However, these organizations will need support to expand their services and keep more youth in the pipeline to a productive adulthood.

## ***Community Resources for After-School Mentoring and Tutoring***

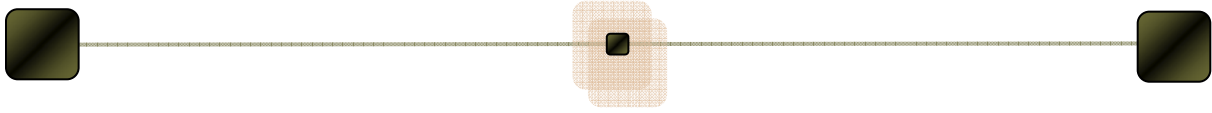
Omaha is blessed with a wide array of after-school, community, and religious organizations that meet the developmental needs of thousands of youth every day. The Mayor's office has been especially active in strengthening out-of-school programs in Omaha, securing nearly \$2 million in 2006 alone to fund these efforts.

Omaha's youth-serving organizations vary in size, population served, and focus of programming. For example, federally funded 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers focus on improving academic achievement. Nebraska and Omaha also have a strong mentoring tradition, as evidenced by organizations such as All Our Kids, TeamMates, and a robust local branch of Big Brothers Big Sisters. Religious organizations are another critical provider of guidance and structure for vulnerable youth. Churches throughout Omaha have youth programs that cover such topics as leadership, academic achievement, avoidance of risk behaviors, and character development. Finally, Omaha is home to several award-winning local affiliates of nationally recognized youth development organizations, including the Boys and Girls Clubs, Boy Scouts, Camp Fire USA, Girls Inc., and Girl Scouts. Those organizations offer comprehensive programming designed to meet the needs of young people identified above.

<b>Youth-Serving Organizations in the Omaha Metropolitan Area</b>				
<b>Organization</b>	<b>Services Provided for Youth</b>	<b>Number of Youth Served Per Year</b>	<b>Ages Served</b>	<b>Geographic Region</b>
100 Black Men of Omaha	Mentoring, education, health and wellness	50	Ages 10-15	North Omaha
All Our Kids	One-on-one and group mentoring, career support, scholarships	350 in 2006-07 school year	Elementary through high school	Greater Omaha
Big Brothers Big Sisters	One-on-one and group mentoring	More than 1,000	Ages 7-12	Omaha and Council Bluffs

## Youth-Serving Organizations in the Omaha Metropolitan Area

Organization	Services Provided for Youth	Number of Youth Served Per Year	Ages Served	Geographic Region
Boys & Girls Clubs of Omaha	Character and leadership, education and career development, health and life skills, the arts, sports and recreation, scholarships	Average daily attendance of about 900, membership of more than 7,000	Ages 6-18	Three centers, in North, South, and West Omaha
Boy Scouts of America – Mid-America Council	Citizenship training, character development, personal fitness	33,000 males	Ages 7-20	58 counties in Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota
Camp Fire USA	Academic support, career development, community involvement, recreation, leadership development	In 2005, 1,389 youth served in 14 schools	Ages 4-18	Schools and homeless shelters across Omaha
Girls Inc.	Health and sexuality, career and life planning, self reliance and life skills, culture and heritage, sports and adventure, leadership and community action	More than 1,000 girls served in centers	Ages 6-18	Two centers, one in North Omaha, one in South Omaha
Girl Scouts of America Great Plains Council	Leadership and self-esteem, community outreach, environmental awareness, financial literacy, health and wellness, the arts	More than 11,000 girls	Ages 5-17	Douglas, Sarpy, Northern Cass Counties; Carter Lake, Iowa
Greater St. Paul Church of God in Christ Ministries	Health and wellness, tutoring, mentoring	75	Grades K-12	Lothrop Magnet School, North Omaha
Leadership Academy (formerly Wesley House)	Leadership development, literacy, legacy building, love	92 African-American youth	Ages 7-12	Franklin Elementary, North Omaha
Salem Baptist Church	After-school and summer programs	65 after school, 300 in summer	Grades K-12	North Omaha



Youth-Serving Organizations in the Omaha Metropolitan Area				
Organization	Services Provided for Youth	Number of Youth Served Per Year	Ages Served	Geographic Region
Solomon Girls Center, Heartland Family Service	Educational, cultural, social, and recreational programs; scholarship program	250 girls	Ages 5-18	Center in North Omaha
TeamMates	School-based one-on-one mentoring	More than 800 in Greater Omaha	Grades 4-12	Statewide
Urban League of Nebraska	Workforce development, college advising, tutoring	100 in after-school programs, 300 through tutoring	Grades K-12	North Omaha

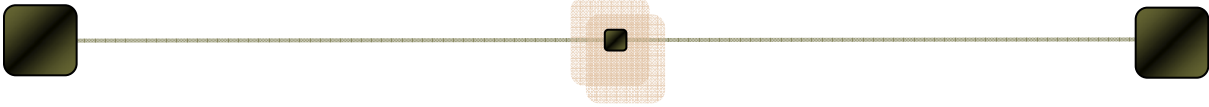
## Strategic Priorities

We recommend the establishment of the *After-School Mentoring and Tutoring for Excellence Task Force* with the following two goals:

- Increase the number of vulnerable youth who receive high-quality programs and services that support their healthy development, such as mentoring, academic supports, career guidance, and character development.
- Assign to every youth a professional who is responsible for monitoring the youth’s progress and ensuring that he or she has the supports needed to stay on a productive path.

As the statistics above show, Omaha has a large population of youth in need of guidance and support to overcome the risk factors of poverty and to avoid the perils associated with being unsupervised. Increasing access to high-quality youth programs and supports will benefit the youth by providing them with the guidance they need to stay on track and reach their full potential. The city of Omaha will also reap the benefits of this initiative because fewer youth will be unsupervised after school, and more youth will have the support they need to stay in school and be prepared to become productive citizens.

Identifying the best approaches to increasing the number of youth who are supported by after-school, mentoring, and youth



development organizations will require cross-agency and cross-organizational collaboration. We recommend that the Task Force consider the following steps in that direction:

**Ensure that all youth have access to a fully qualified professional counselor, as well as an adult mentor.**

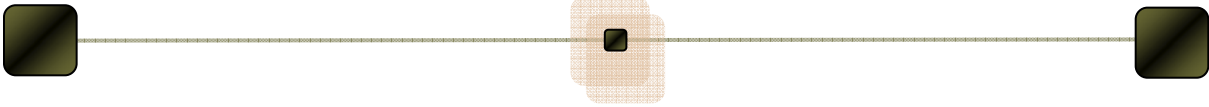
All youth who are at risk of dropping out should have access to a professional who can assist them in getting needed services. For some youth, their most important connections with adults occur outside of school hours in youth development agencies. Other youth benefit from the personalized attention and guidance of a mentor. Youth organizations need to increase the number of well-trained professional counselors on staff and expand the pool of mentors available to help at-risk youth reach their potential.

**Develop and implement a common data system.**

The same youth interact with many social service agencies, the school system, and, too often, the juvenile justice system. Unfortunately, no system allows professionals to track students across these various agencies. A common data system could be built in coordination with the proposed data system for the Omaha Metropolitan Area school districts. Such systems are feasible and are in place in Jefferson County, Kentucky, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and are important components of program accountability. A major concern is confidentiality, but that concern can be addressed. For example, in Philadelphia, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania handle the data and ensure adherence to privacy rights.

**Create a formal, citywide network of youth-serving organizations.**

Members of the network could develop or adopt programming quality standards, identify common needs and areas for collaboration, and seek sources of funding that would not be available to individual organizations. These members can also help to build the common data system, assess the capacity of their organizations to meet the increased demands to serve youth, and design a more coordinated system for doing so. Over time, the goals of the network could be to develop a model that provides an increasingly comprehensive and integrated array of services to



support youth's development and successful transitions to adulthood.

**Establish a mechanism for providing ongoing assistance to youth development organizations.**

To meet the increased demand created by the initiative, youth-serving organizations in Omaha would greatly benefit from technical assistance and other activities that are designed to increase their capacity to reach more youth. Technical assistance could focus on such topics as organizational assessments, strategic plan development, training workshops, and on-site coaching.

**Develop the next generation of youth-service providers.**

Institutional capacity is an ongoing challenge in youth-serving organizations, so it is imperative that they develop pipelines for recruiting and training individuals to work in their organizations. The Task Force should devise a strategy for developing the next generation of youth-service providers through internship and career programs for teenagers and through partnerships with local postsecondary institutions.

## Reducing Truancy and Recovering Lost Youth

*Every day, thousands of students are absent from the Omaha Public Schools. Some of these students are truant, having no excuse for missing school. These students have lower achievement and are at higher risk of juvenile delinquency, drug use, and dropping out. Indeed, more than 3,600 juveniles are arrested annually in Omaha. Once youth are in the juvenile justice system, getting them back on track is challenging but worth the effort because of the immense social and financial cost savings. The strategic priorities include developing a common truancy protocol across districts, establishing a pilot Truancy Intervention Program that uses exemplary practices to solve Omaha's truancy problem, and providing individualized case management/mentoring and wraparound services to youth to reintegrate them into the education system and the workforce.*

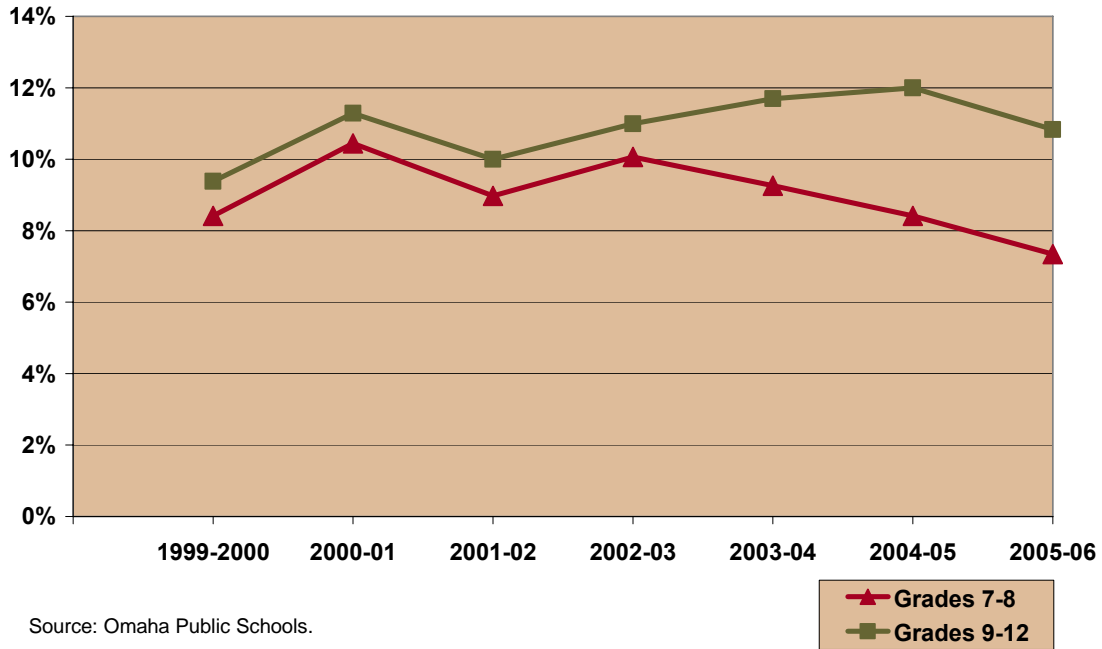
### Scope of the Problem

*Students cannot learn and succeed if they are not in school.*

On any one day, more than 3,000 Omaha Public Schools students are absent from school.<sup>9</sup> Typically, the percentage of students absent from school increases in the higher grades. More than 1 in every 10 high school students were absent on the average day in 2005-06. There is good news, however. This number is down slightly from earlier years. And absenteeism is also down in grades 7-8. This trend may be due in part to district efforts to identify students with high absenteeism and communicate with their parents in a timely manner.

<sup>9</sup> On average in 2005-06, 3,150 students were absent from OPS on any one day, based on 92.88 percent attendance of 2005-06 Average Daily Membership of 44,247.39.

### Students Absent in OPS on an Average Day, 1999-2006



Following a nationwide pattern, school attendance at OPS lags attendance in the region's less urban, more affluent school districts. In 2004-05, the 11 other districts operating in Douglas and Sarpy Counties reported overall attendance rates around 95 percent.

Attendance in Omaha Metropolitan Area School Districts, 1994-95, 2000-01, and 2004-05			
School District	Attendance Percentage		
	1994-95	2000-01	2004-05
Omaha Public Schools	93	93	91
Ralston Public Schools	96	96	96
Westside Community Schools	95	96	96
Millard Public Schools	96	96	96
Elkhorn Public Schools	95	96	96
Bennington Public Schools	96	96	97
Valley Public Schools	95	96	96
Waterloo Public Schools	96	95	95
Papillion-La Vista Public Schools	96	96	95
Bellevue Public Schools	97	96	96
South Sarpy Schools	95	96	96
Gretna Public Schools	96	95	95

Source: Truancy Committee, Metropolitan Child Advocacy Coalition.

*A portion of students absent from school are truant, meaning that they have no valid excuse for being out of school.*

Not all students who are absent from school are truants—they may be sick or have other legitimate excuses. Truancy is commonly defined as an absence from school, for either a single class or a full school day, that is not excused by the parents or legal guardians or by the school.

OPS reports “truancy days,” meaning the number of student-days of absences when neither the school nor the parent knows the student’s whereabouts. OPS reported 7,512 truancy days in 2005-06, up 16 percent from the previous year. Most of these truancy days are at the high school level.

Truancy in Omaha Public Secondary Schools 2004-05 and 2005-06				
Grade Level	Truancy Rate <sup>h</sup>		Truancy Days	
	2004-05	2005-06	2004-05	2005-06
Middle	0.07%	0.08%	845	865
High school	0.24%	0.03%	4,959	6,647
Alternative <sup>i</sup>	0.46%		665	
<b>Total truancy days</b>			<b>6,469</b>	<b>7,512</b>

Source: Omaha Public Schools Division of Research.

These figures mean that over the course of the 2005-06 school year, students were truant for 7,512 days in middle and high schools. In absolute terms, this number is significant because not only are truant students not learning what they are supposed to, they are also breaking the law. As a percentage of all student days, however, this truancy figure is less than 1 percent.

This method of calculating truancy does not reveal whether a few students are absent many times or many students are absent a few times. We do know, however, that there are hundreds of chronic truants—students who have unexcused or unverified

<sup>h</sup> The Truancy Rate is defined by the Nebraska Department of Education:  $TR = [ADT / (\text{School building ADM} \times \text{Days in Session})] \times 100$ . TR is Truancy Rate, ADT is Accumulative Days Truant, and ADM is Average Daily Membership.

<sup>i</sup> Beginning in 2005-06, alternative school truancy, discipline, assessments, and other statistics were assigned to the student’s home attendance school rather than the alternative school.

absences for anywhere from 5 to 20 days and who are formally referred to the County Attorney for truancy.<sup>j</sup>

Truancy Referrals to the Douglas County Attorney, 2004 – 06			
	2004	2005	2006*
Number of Referrals	467	445	301

\* 2006 referrals were for the period 1/1/06 to 11/14/06. Source: Juvenile Assessment Center.

Truancy is not just a school system concern. Truancy is a problem also from the point of view of both the criminal justice system and the Mayor’s office. At the November 2006 meeting of the Juvenile Justice and Provider Forum, both the Mayor and the Chief of Police spoke openly and publicly in support of the seven priorities spelled out in the Douglas County Juvenile Services Comprehensive Plan for 2006 through 2008. One of those priorities includes increasing awareness about truancy and decreasing its incidence. The Chief of Police has frequently referred to truancy as “the elephant in the room” in juvenile justice. In his view, truancy is a significant issue that is not being dealt with to the full extent necessary in light of its implications for youth, the educational system, the criminal justice system, Omaha’s neighborhoods, and the broader society.

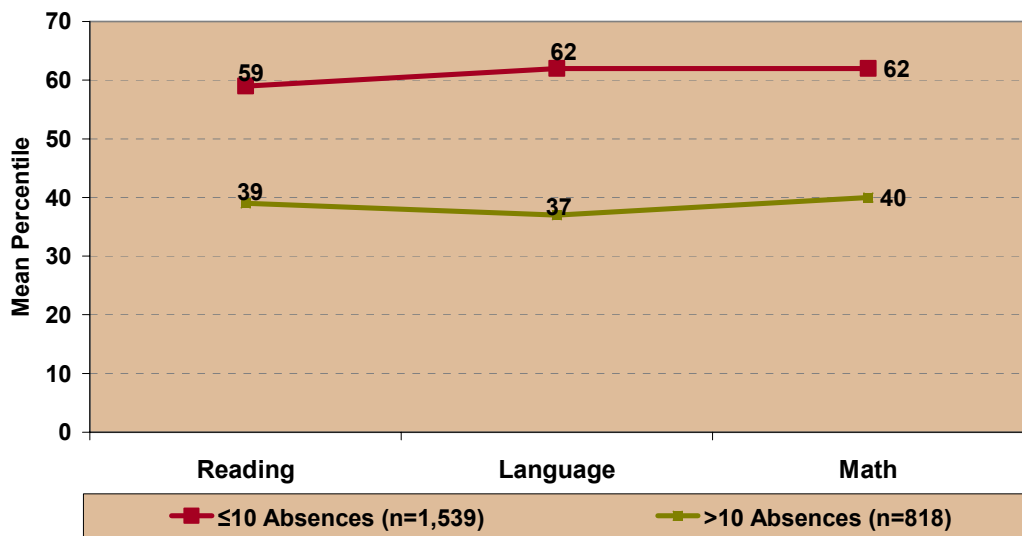
*High rates of absenteeism and truancy are costly to individual youth and society.*

Chronic absenteeism and truancy result in a variety of detrimental effects to individuals and society. For example:

**Students who miss school fall behind academically.** Youth who attend school regularly score higher on standardized tests than those who miss school often. OPS students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade who had more than 10 absences (i.e., about 35 percent of the total test takers) scored 20 to 25 percentile points below their peers who attended school more regularly.

<sup>j</sup> While dropout rates are high, an even higher proportion of students quit school for some period of time during their educational careers and then return. It is difficult to draw a clear line between chronic truancy, periodic school dropout, and “final” school dropout, which can cause confusion for efforts to define extended truancy and dropout rates. For these reasons, OPS does not have an estimate for the dropout rate among truants.

### Relationship Between Attendance and Student Achievement in the Omaha Public Schools: Eighth-Grade Scores on CAT



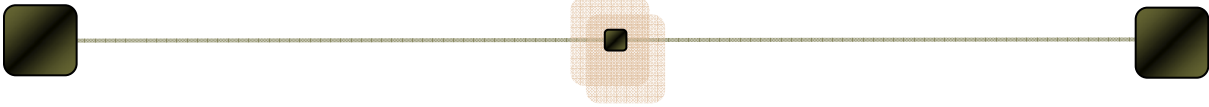
Source: Omaha Public Schools Division of Research.

#### **Students who miss school are at higher risk of drug use.**

Truancy is also recognized as a good predictor of drug use. For example, a recent report showed that truant 8<sup>th</sup> graders were 4.5 times as likely as regular school attendees to smoke marijuana.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, a University of Maryland study found that 51 percent of female juvenile detainees not in school at the time of their arrests tested positive for drug use.

#### **Students who miss school are at high risk of dropping out.**

Truancy is an early warning indicator that youth are headed for educational failure. When students are chronically truant from school, it is a natural progression to, at some point, simply not return.<sup>25</sup> Studies show that approximately 80 percent of dropouts are truant the year before leaving school. Some 70 percent of suspended youth are chronically truant in the 6 months prior to their suspension. Fifty percent of expelled students are chronically truant in the year before their expulsion.



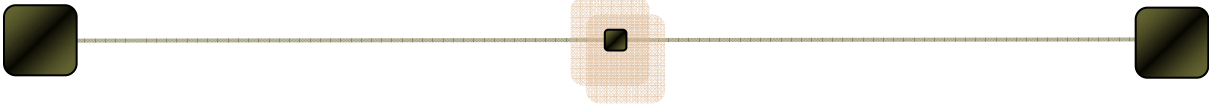
**Students who miss school are likely to maintain the cycle of poverty.** According to the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention,<sup>26</sup> adults who were frequently truant as teenagers were much more likely than their peers who attended school regularly to have

- poorer health and mental health;
- lower-paying jobs;
- a greater chance of living in poverty;
- more reliance on welfare support;
- children who exhibit problem behaviors; and
- an increased likelihood of incarceration.

Thus, truants are significantly more likely than students who attend school regularly to increase the burden of welfare expenditures and other social service programs.

***Truancy reduction programs are cost-effective investments.***

Truancy reduction programs are highly cost-effective because the cost of dropping out is so high. For example, an evaluation of Florida's truancy reduction program<sup>27</sup> estimates that each dollar invested in the program could generate a payoff of \$67 in a lower cost of social welfare programs, lower criminal justice expenditures, and higher income tax contributions. Several Colorado counties estimate that for their truancy reduction projects to reach a breakeven point on their investment, only one student who otherwise would not have graduated needs to graduate every 4 years.<sup>28</sup> Using that estimate and the assumption that each high school dropout costs society \$98,000 in lost tax revenue, a truancy reduction program that cost \$980,000 annually would break even if it helped only 10 youth stay on track to graduation. However, hundreds of youth could be served with \$980,000, which thus would be a sound investment.



*Truancy and juvenile crime are linked, and juvenile crime is far too prevalent on Omaha's streets.*

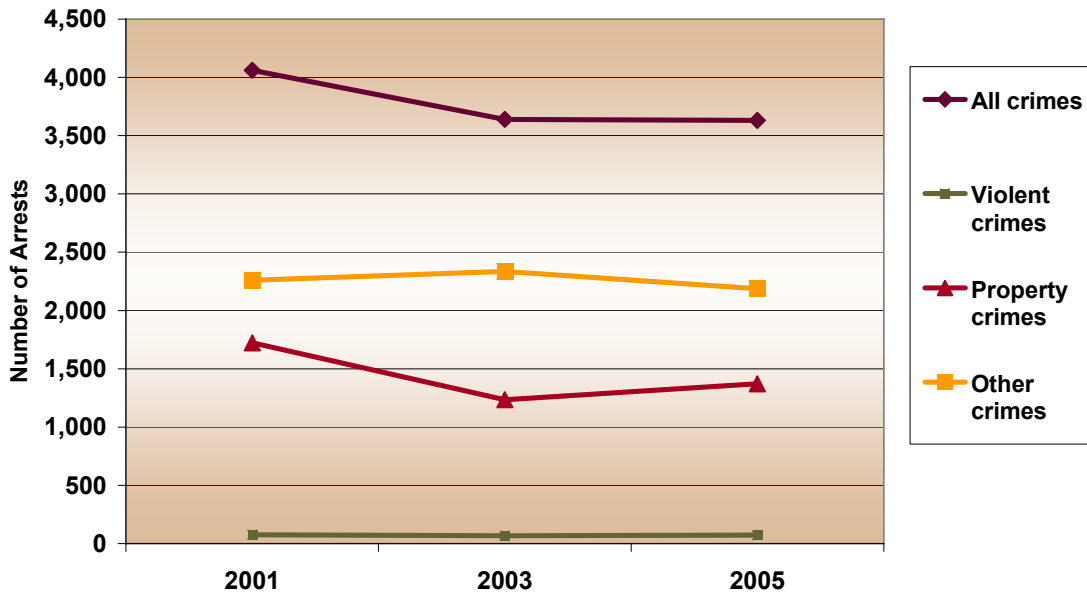
Students who miss school are at higher risk of juvenile delinquency. In a 2002 study of juvenile offenders in Nebraska, truancy was identified as a risk factor for 60 percent of the roughly 1,100 serious offenders assessed. Similar findings came from a review of 900 first-time or low-severity offenders referred to Omaha's Juvenile Assessment Center in 2005.

These local data are bolstered by studies from across the nation showing that chronic absenteeism is the most powerful predictor of delinquency among youth. Several studies calculate the proportion of juvenile offenders who were truant or chronically absent at 75 percent to 80 percent. Studies also find a link between high rates of truancy and high daytime burglary and vandalism rates. When police in Tacoma, Washington, targeted neighborhoods to bring in truant youth, for example, they reduced daytime crime by more than 60 percent.<sup>29</sup> In Van Nuys, California, shoplifting arrests fell 60 percent after a truancy sweep. And St. Paul, Minnesota, reported a 50 percent drop in crimes such as purse snatching in response to a policy of picking up truants and taking them to a new school attendance center.<sup>30</sup>

Youth criminal activity is a concern in Omaha and across the state. The numbers provided by the Omaha Police Department (OPD) are startling: on average, 10 juveniles are arrested each day of the year, for more than 3,600 arrests annually. Omaha youth are charged with crimes ranging in severity from simple misdemeanors to serious felonies, but fewer than 100 arrests each year are for violent crimes. Fortunately, juvenile arrests in Omaha have declined somewhat since the beginning of the decade.

In some instances, youth are charged with committing crimes in numbers that are out of proportion to the size of the youth population. For example, OPD data show that while youth ages 10 to 17 made up just under 12 percent of the 2004 population of the city of Omaha, they constituted nearly a quarter of all arrests for robbery that year.

### Juvenile Arrests 2001-2005



Source: Omaha Police Department.

Number and Types of Juvenile Arrests, 2004 Omaha Police Department		
Offense*	Number of Juvenile Arrests*	Juvenile Arrests as Percent of Total Arrests
Murder/Manslaughter	3	12.5%
Forcible rape	5	10.9%
Robbery	49	23.4%
Felony/Aggravated assault	34	12.0%
Misdemeanor assault	211	9.5%

\*Note: The chart contains only selected, not all, offenses and juvenile arrests in 2004.  
Source: Omaha Police Department.

Gang activity is also a concern in Omaha. According to OPD, the Gang Unit reported a 16 percent increase in gang activity during the second quarter of 2006, as well as an increase in gang membership of 16 percent during that period. OPD estimates that there are hundreds of youth in the Omaha area who may become vulnerable to the gang lifestyle. However, at present the police department considers only a small percentage of these vulnerable youth to be “hard-core gang members.”

*Once youth are involved in criminal activity, it is very challenging to help them get back on track for the long term.*

Youth recidivism, the rate at which ex-offenders commit another crime, is estimated at 67 percent in the United States.<sup>31</sup> Many causes underlie the high recidivism rate. One important reason is that the risk factors that contributed to the first criminal offense remain in place after the youth are released. For example, the youth often return to neighborhoods that are battling crime, drugs, gangs, and unemployment. Often, they have few opportunities to engage in positive activities, nor do they have positive role models or mentors to steer them away from negative activities. Many juvenile offenders have behavioral or mental health problems, low literacy levels, or other needs that, left untreated, hinder their forward progress and lead them to see crime as the only option.

As one Omaha Police Department officer said, “We are not adequately preparing the youth, and the parents, for a successful reentry to school and the community. We release youth from incarceration with the same red shirt and red bandanna [gang symbols] that they wore coming in.” For these reasons, it is important that youth who are leaving out-of-home placements receive adequate mentoring, academic supports, mental health and substance abuse counseling, and career preparation services that will prepare them for a more positive future.

Another important cause of recidivism is limited and fragmented services after incarceration. While incarcerated, youth have access to a broad range of services through a comprehensive service plan that is coordinated by a case manager. As the youth reenter home, school, and the community, they continue to have the same needs, but they typically do not have a plan that knits together an array of services to meet those needs. When such services are offered after incarceration, they are typically too short in duration to help youth meaningfully navigate the challenges of reentering mainstream society.

Successful reentry into school can also be hindered by insufficient information sharing among public and private agencies. For example, schools are often provided with little or no information on youth offenders, and records and credits are not always transferred in a timely fashion. In Omaha, there is no shared database allowing public and private service providers to track youth.

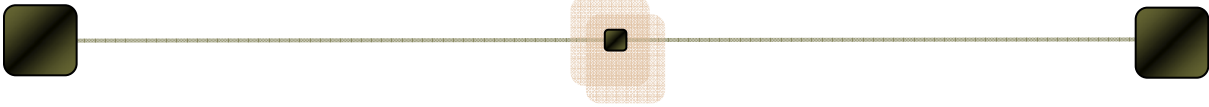
*The human, societal, and fiscal costs of youth crime are significant; thus, the savings generated by getting youth back on track are also significant.*

Incarceration is expensive. Consider that it costs approximately \$4,000 every month, or \$48,000 a year, to hold one youth at the Douglas County Youth Center or at the Geneva or Kearney Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Center (YRTC). Given that the average stay at Kearney is 7 months, getting 50 youth back on track and out of Kearney each year would generate cost savings of \$1.4 million. Keeping 50 more youth out of the Douglas County Youth Center, with its average stay of 1 month, would generate an additional \$200,000 in cost savings. Therefore, an initiative that could successfully keep just 100 youth out of detention would save Omaha \$1.6 million annually.

In addition to not triggering the high costs of incarceration, the financial impact of getting back on track is staggering.

- One policy institute calculated that every teen prevented from adopting a life of crime (including future adult offenses) could save the country between \$1.7 million and \$2.3 million.<sup>32</sup>
- A youth who is back on track and finishes high school will pay an estimated \$3,374 *more* in annual taxes than if s/he had dropped out of school without a diploma.
- Over a lifetime, a youth who is back on track and earns a high school diploma will pay an estimated \$98,000 more in taxes than a high school dropout.

Getting youth back on track also reduces crime and victimization rates. A RAND Corporation study found that for every \$1 million spent on providing services to get juveniles back on track, 72 serious crimes, such as homicide, robbery, assault, and arson, could be prevented.<sup>33</sup> Thus, assisting youth to find positive alternatives to crime can reduce youth crime rates, property losses, and human suffering. A reduction in youth crime would also be accompanied by a reduction in youth victimization, because an estimated 92 percent of the victims of youth crimes are youth themselves.<sup>34</sup>



Taken together, the benefits of programs designed to get youth offenders back on track to a productive future far outweigh the costs of those programs.

## ***Community Resources to Reduce Truancy and to Recover Lost Youth***

### ***Resources to reduce truancy.***

All of the local school districts are concerned about truancy, and all have policies and practices in place to track and deal with truants. In fact, Nebraska statutes specifically require schools to make substantial efforts to resolve students' attendance problems after only five days of absences in any given quarter (Neb. Rev. Stat. Sec. 79-209).

**Student Personnel Assistants in OPS** monitor attendance at OPS schools. Once a student reaches five unexcused absences in a quarter, the Student Personnel Assistant develops an Attendance Team Intervention Plan for that student. The plan tracks interventions, such as calls to parents, warning letters, and referrals to the County Attorney. According to current OPS policy and procedures, the schools send warning letters to the parents or legal guardians after 5 absences, and again at 10, 15, and 20 absences. After 20 absences, the case is referred to the Douglas County Attorney's office for possible legal action.

**Other area school districts** have different policies. Millard and Westside districts, for example, refer truancy cases to the County Attorney after only five absences in a single quarter. Bellevue reports involving local police on the first day of truancy.


It is striking that *there is no common strategy for dealing with truancy across the Greater Omaha area*. The Omaha community is aware of the disjointed approach toward truancy, and the **Metropolitan Child Advocacy Coalition's** Truancy Committee is bringing together stakeholders from across Douglas and Sarpy Counties to build consensus on solving this long-standing challenge. The goals of that work are to (1) develop a uniform definition of habitual truancy, (2) facilitate writing protocols for

enforcement, (3) conduct a public awareness campaign, and (4) design and pilot prevention strategies. The Metropolitan Child Advocacy Coalition has also drafted a best practices manual regarding truancy. The manual has been a valuable resource for area schools but needs to be updated.

Summary of Truancy Policies and Procedures for Omaha Metropolitan Area Public School Districts				
School District	Policy on File	Regular Procedure	Timing of Warning Letters	Number of Absences Triggering Referral
Omaha	Yes	Yes	5, 10, 15, 20 absences	20 days
Ralston	Yes	Yes	10 days, 15 days, 20 days	20 days
Westside	Yes	Yes	Not specified	5 per quarter
Millard	Yes	Yes	One week	1 <sup>st</sup> quarter: 5 2 <sup>nd</sup> quarter: 10 3 <sup>rd</sup> quarter: 15 4 <sup>th</sup> quarter: 20
Elkhorn	Yes		One week	5 per quarter 20 per year
Bennington		Yes	10 days	
Douglas County West		Yes	Not specified	20 days
Bellevue	Yes	Yes		
Papillion-La Vista	Yes	Yes	9 days 12 days 20 days	20 days

Several truancy interventions have been launched over the years in Omaha:

- In 1997, the Omaha Community Partnership provided \$15,000 in funding to each of three schools in what came to be known as the **Three Schools Project**. Although the truancy interventions piloted did affect attendance rates, the program was discontinued because funding was not available for continuation or expansion.
- A **Being in School is Cool** campaign was launched in 1999, using billboards and stickers to urge youth to attend school. Funding ran out after several years, and the program is no longer in operation.
- **Street Smart Diversion** began in the 2000-01 school year. The initial results of this diversion program for truants operated by **Wesley House** were positive. However, the program became less effective over time and was not granted ongoing funding.



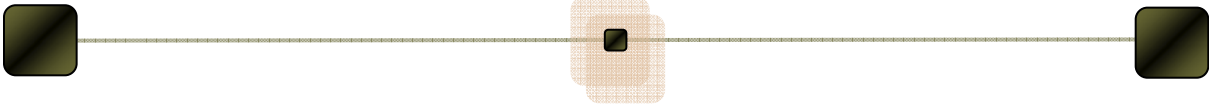
In the past, according to school officials, truancy programs have often lacked careful evaluations. Truancy programs have also been stymied by high caseloads for the guidance counselors and other professionals charged with implementing the programs. In addition, several officials pointed out that truancy programs will need sufficient and sustained funding if they are to be effective over the long term.

Currently, several truancy approaches are being implemented in Greater Omaha:

- **North High School** has a Truancy Abatement Grant with the Omaha Police Department to provide additional monitoring and services to truant youth who are already in the juvenile justice system.
- In **South High School**, the Chicano Awareness Center has staff who monitor attendance, contact youth and families quickly when a pattern of absences is noted, and develop a tailored plan to address the reasons behind the absences.
- The **Juvenile Assessment Center** has a cooperative agreement to work with truant youth from **Westside** in a pilot project to test truancy diversion.
- **Millard North High School** is generating a good response to its early intervention approach of sending a warning letter to parents after only three unexcused absences.
- **Papillion-La Vista** has a cooperative agreement with law enforcement to pick up truant youth and take them to a school attendance center for appropriate action.

The justice system has also played an increasingly important role in addressing truancy. Beginning in 2004, the courts began to handle cases more aggressively for elementary students who were not attending school and began holding parents responsible for the school attendance of elementary-age children. This shift was largely viewed as a positive development. Under the leadership of Judge Daniels, spring 2005 saw the development of a common process and documentation for truancy case referrals among Douglas County school districts and the County Attorney.

The current truancy programs, although they each offer promising approaches for certain school populations, are limited. They are small, not reaching all youth in need of their services. Moreover,



they are typically not comprehensive in scope and duration. Finally, they do not consistently include the following elements that have been proven effective:


- Early intervention after only a few days of unexcused absences.
- Small caseloads to provide optimal service to truant youth.
- Wraparound services to combat the specific causes of the youth's truancy, such as behavioral issues, substance abuse, family issues, school achievement, and community issues.
- Longer-term interventions beyond the typical 30 or 60 days of services.

The professionals charged with boosting attendance in the Omaha region agree that to have an impact, they need to pilot new, evidence-based programs that incorporate proven tools from exemplary regional and national programs. Moreover, these leaders agree that the programs need sufficient resources to support long-term implementation for the youth who need help to remain in school.

### *Resources to address the needs of youth leaving the juvenile justice system.*

Omaha already has a strong juvenile justice system with a key focus on diversion from incarceration and getting youth offenders back on track quickly. Some exemplary efforts include:

**Juvenile Assessment Center.** The Juvenile Assessment Center (JAC) is a key institution in the Douglas County Attorney's Juvenile Diversion Program. The goals of the center are to provide appropriate services to juveniles (and their families) when the juveniles are arrested or referred to the County Attorney's office. The JAC assesses juveniles, identifying those who are likely to benefit from diversion away from court involvement through timely, positive intervention. Juveniles who are deemed eligible for diversion receive a JAC case plan prepared by a specialist and approved by the County Attorney. These case plans provide youth with access to approximately 30 different services—including drug and alcohol education, outpatient substance abuse treatment, family counseling, anger management, tutoring, and positive recreational activities—from more than 25 public and private



service providers. If juveniles successfully complete their case plans, the County Attorney takes no further action in the criminal case.

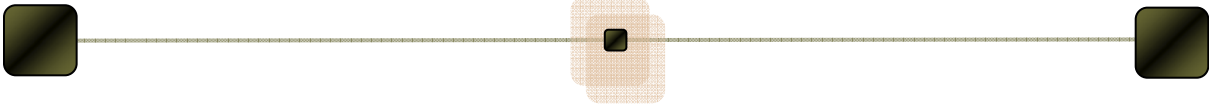
The JAC assists youth to get back on track on the front end of the criminal justice system, before they are incarcerated. For example, from July 2004 to June 2005, the JAC:

- Assessed 928 referrals from the County Attorney.
- Identified 623 (67 percent) of those referrals as eligible for diversion.
- Successfully assisted 517 youth (56 percent of all referrals) to complete diversion, with the County Attorney thereby taking no further action in those cases.

With JAC assistance, those 517 youth had the opportunity to get their lives back on track. The JAC's proven model, which uses case managers to coordinate multiple services, can also serve as a model for other populations of youth, such as those leaving incarceration or those who need help to stay in school or on a positive path.

**Tracker.** From 1996 to 2005, the State of Nebraska supported the Tracker program. The program was designed to keep vulnerable youth home and in school instead of institutionalized. Tracker staff worked with youth and families for 90 days, monitoring school attendance, employment, adherence to curfews, and participation in required counseling. These professionals provided intensive face-to-face supervision, advocated on behalf of the youth to secure needed services, served as mentors and role models, and offered crisis intervention services. Over its lifetime, Tracker helped more than 800 youth remain in the community instead of being institutionalized. The program was discontinued by the Nebraska Health and Human Services Department despite extensive support from service providers, youth, and their families. Tracker services cost only \$23.61 per day, less than one-fifth of the daily cost of detaining a youth at the Douglas County Youth Center.

**Aftercare planning at Kearney and Geneva.** Staff at the Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers conduct needs assessments and develop recommendations for the care of youth after they leave these facilities. The aim of these programs is to



prepare youth to reenter their communities, connect youth to the necessary community-based programs that will assist their transition, and ensure that appropriate services are provided when the youth are released from incarceration.

**Youth development organizations.** Many youth development organizations throughout Omaha welcome post-incarceration youth into their programs, providing them with recreational alternatives, tutoring, mentoring, and a wide variety of services and supports. Examples include the Boy Scouts, the Boys and Girls Clubs, Camp Fire USA, Catholic Charities, the Child Saving Institute, Girls Inc., Heartland Family Service, Journeys, Lutheran Family Services, Owens Educational Service, United Way, and the YMCA.

In spite of these resources, many youth released from the juvenile justice system are not getting sufficient support to reenter the community. Upon release from incarceration, most youth find themselves without needed support. Aftercare plans are severely hampered by several gaps in social services. For example, there is a shortage of aftercare coordinators to whom the detention facilities can transfer records, assessments, and service needs information. The existing coordinators have higher than optimal caseloads. For example, probation officers have extensive caseloads, and their primary responsibility is ensuring that youth meet the conditions of their probation; as a result, they have little capacity to provide additional services or assessments. In addition, social services are fragmented. The criminal justice, behavioral health, and social service agencies rarely forge partnerships that enable them to provide seamless services for youth who are leaving out-of-home placement.

## ***Strategic Priorities***

The goals of the *Reducing Truancy and Recovering Lost Youth Initiative* are to increase awareness and decrease the incidence of truancy and to provide individualized, wraparound services for youth leaving an out-of-home placement in the juvenile justice system. We recommend establishing a *Reducing Truancy and Recovering Lost Youth Task Force* with the following strategic priorities related to the overarching goals of the initiative:



**Develop a common truancy enforcement protocol for Omaha Metropolitan Area schools.**

In conjunction with the justice system, the school systems could develop uniform criteria for defining truancy and enforcing school attendance and uniform procedures for court involvement.

**Develop a pilot truancy intervention program that incorporates evidence-based best practices.**

To be effective, such a program must address both the truancy and the causes underlying the truancy. Therefore, it would be useful for the Task Force to identify a range of models that focus on different components of effective truancy programs, such as early notification, small caseloads, an individualized intervention plan, wraparound support services, long-term monitoring, mentoring, and the like.

**Evaluate truancy approaches currently in use.**

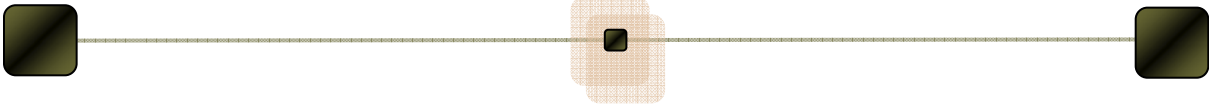
Those evaluations could be used to refine Omaha's intervention program.

**Roll out truancy intervention programs in middle and high schools.**

Ideally, these programs would be tailored to individual school population needs and would draw on exemplary local, regional, and national models. One such exemplary practice is the employment of school-based truancy case managers. Several truancy case managers would be needed at each school to keep caseloads low (in the range of 20 to 30 students per manager). Sufficient funding for long-term program sustainability will be key to the success of truancy intervention programs in middle and high schools.

**Develop and implement a program of individualized services delivered by professionals.**

Ideally, each youth who is in danger of leaving the pipeline, whether through chronic truancy or juvenile delinquency, would have access to wraparound services that are coordinated by a case manager through a plan that is tailored to the youth and his



or her family. These plans should assess and address youth's multiple needs, helping them to improve their school attendance and performance and supporting them as they reenter the community after incarceration. Some examples of services that might be included in the plan are mentoring, substance abuse treatment, mental health counseling, literacy development or tutoring, employment training, parole services, emergency shelter, parenting education, and conflict resolution.

**Increase information sharing among public and private agencies to better coordinate youth services.**

The shared juvenile justice data system created by (and often referred to as) the Juvenile Accountability Incentive Block Grant, or JAIBG, is considered a critical step forward in providing better services to youth. The JAIBG provides multiple governmental juvenile justice agencies with access to timely, comprehensive data. However, other youth-serving agencies, including schools and youth development organizations, currently lack access to a similarly centralized, updated database on youth needs, assessments, and services. For example, schools report that youth arrive at their newly assigned schools before their records do, leaving the school administrators, counselors, and teachers without critical information on educational and support services. Widespread access to these data would ease youth's transitions and heighten their chances for educational success. Enhanced information sharing would also enable earlier detection of problematic behavior and would allow case managers to target appropriate services and monitor whether services were being provided. Increased access to data would also facilitate careful program monitoring and evaluation, leading to greater accountability.

## Addressing Adolescent Behavioral Health

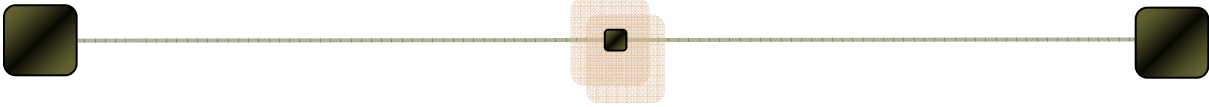
*Mental health and substance abuse are serious issues that too often interact and lead to behavioral problems and youth crime. Studies show that the majority of incarcerated youth in Omaha have been diagnosed with mental health or substance abuse treatment needs. The strategic priorities are to provide better support services to families of youth with mental health and substance abuse issues and to expand the continuum of adolescent mental health care in Omaha to include crisis intervention and support.*

### Scope of the Challenge

*It is difficult to obtain accurate local data related to adolescent mental health, risky behaviors, and substance abuse.*

Gathering information on mental health and substance abuse among youth in Omaha is a difficult task. For individuals, families, and school districts, admitting the existence of either problem carries a stigma and, in the case of substance abuse, legal repercussions. As a result, these problems often go unreported and untreated.

Efforts to gather Omaha-specific data are further hampered by the choice of some local school districts not to participate in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). The YRBS is a biennial survey that asks students in grades 9-12 to report on a variety of behaviors and attitudes related to substance abuse, dangerous behaviors, and mental health issues. The survey was developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Division of Adolescent and School Health, whose mission is to support state and local education agencies “to help build and/or strengthen their capacity to improve child and adolescent health.” The CDC provides funding for state and local education agencies to establish or strengthen systematic procedures to monitor critical health behaviors of youth within the state through implementation of the YRBS. The data generated from the YRBS are instrumental



in improving policies and programs that can reduce health risk behaviors and improve the health of school-age youth.

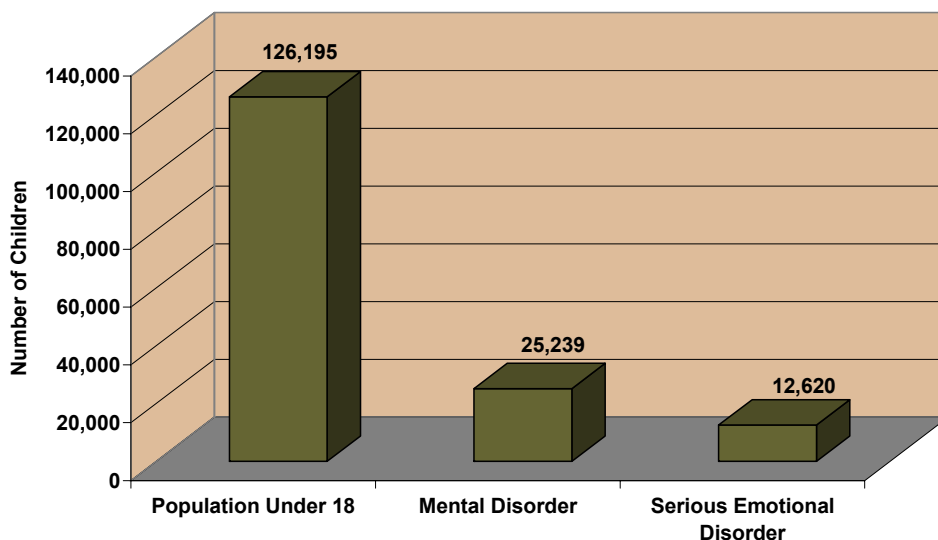
Participation in the YRBS is voluntary. According to community and political leaders in Omaha, some local districts opt not to participate because the results of the survey have the potential to generate negative publicity, and the survey contains questions that are considered too personal and intrusive.

Having the data from this survey might help OPS and community groups to secure more public funding for a wide range of prevention and intervention programs, because the results could be used to demonstrate specific needs. As one example, the state of Nebraska receives \$1.5 million from a federal abstinence program,<sup>35</sup> and state officials used YRBS data to make the case for receiving those funds. As another example, Nebraska Congressman Tom Osborne championed the federal STOP Underage Drinking Act, which “establishes federal coordination and reporting among agencies involved; authorizes a national media campaign against underage drinking; provides additional resources to prevent underage drinking; and expands research and collects new data on underage drinking.” He cited statistics from the YRBS in arguing for the bill. If local districts had data and met other eligibility criteria, they might be able to secure additional funding for prevention and treatment programs.

***Mental health issues and substance abuse are common problems.***

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) estimates that one in five children and adolescents in the United States have a mental disorder. One in 10 have a serious emotional disturbance that severely disrupts daily functioning at home, in school, or in the community. Using these figures, the study team estimates that approximately 25,000 youth in Douglas County have mental health disorders and that more than 12,000 have serious emotional disorders.

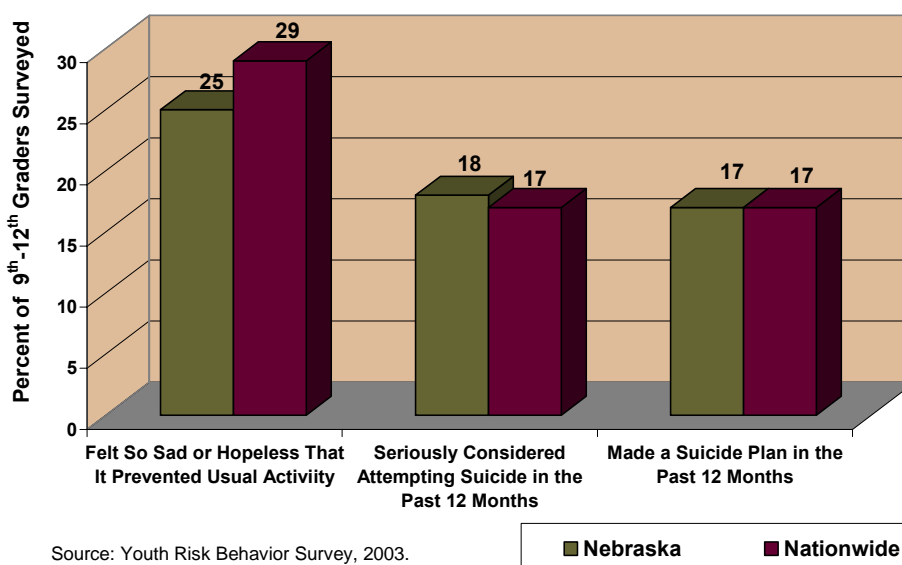
### Estimate of Children with Mental Health Disorders in Douglas County



Source: Estimates based on national prevalence figures, NIMH, 2005.

State-level studies indicate that Nebraska follows national patterns in terms of mental health issues. Much of the available data comes from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey.<sup>36</sup> On the 2003 YRBS, a quarter of Nebraska high school students reported “feeling so sad or hopeless that it prevented a usual activity,” and 17 percent reported making a plan to commit suicide.

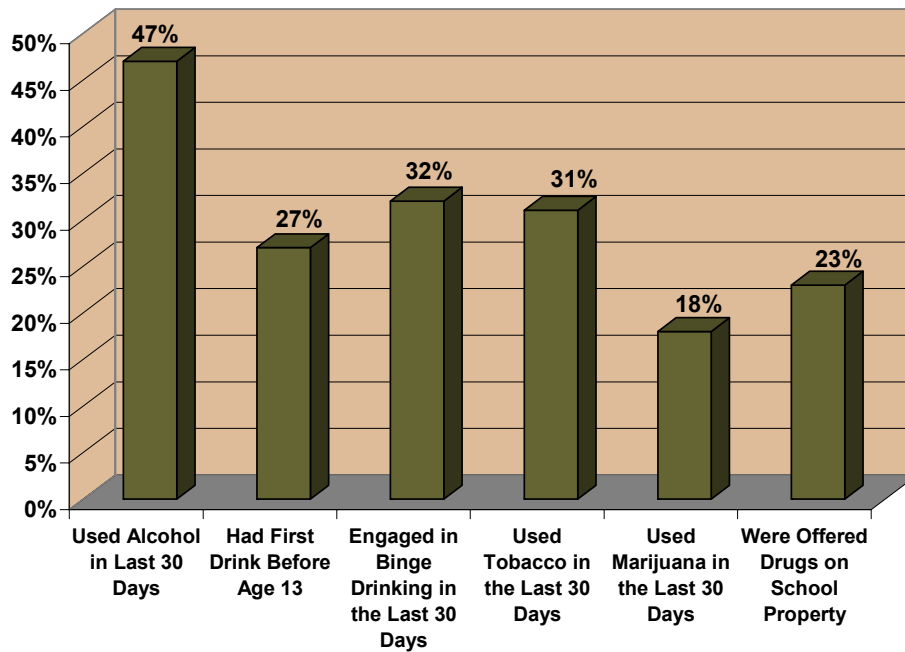
### Comparison of Selected Indicators of Mental Health for High School Students (Nebraska and United States)



Source: Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2003.

Many adolescents and adults with untreated mental illness “self-medicate” with tobacco, alcohol, or illicit drugs, which can lead to substance abuse. Available data do indicate that Nebraska’s high school students are using alcohol and drugs, mostly at rates that are comparable to those of their peers in other states. For example, on the 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, nearly half of Nebraska high school students reported drinking alcohol in the preceding 30 days, and nearly 20 percent reported using marijuana. Those figures are similar to national estimates of drug and alcohol use, but Nebraska ranked third nationally in binge drinking on that survey. Also startling was the fact that nearly one in four high school students reported being offered, sold, or given illegal drugs on campus in the previous year. It is important to note that people who use cocaine or methamphetamines usually begin with tobacco and alcohol.

### Nebraska Teenagers Reporting Alcohol, Tobacco, or Drug Use



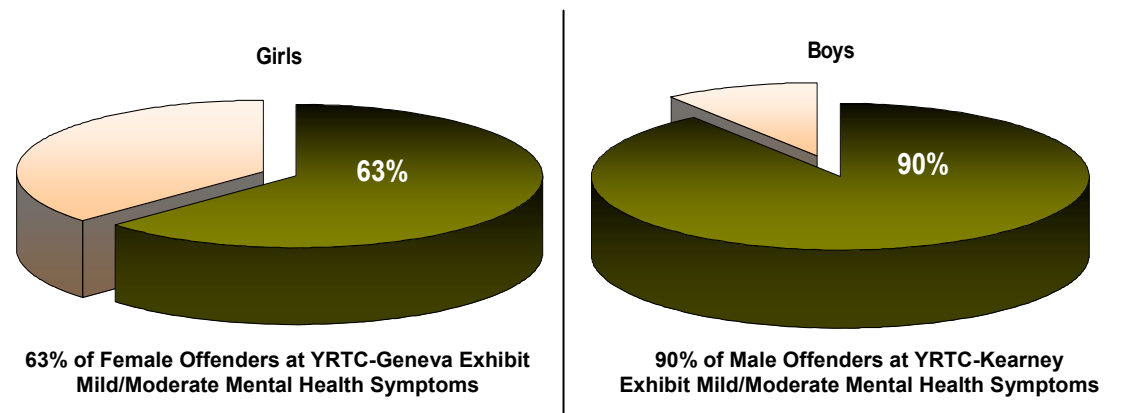
Source: Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2003.

***Mental health problems and substance abuse often are the underlying causes of dropping out and juvenile crime.***

Students who have mental health problems or who are abusing alcohol or drugs are much more likely to be truant and, ultimately, to drop out of school. For example, the dropout rate for students with severe emotional and behavioral needs is approximately twice that of other students.<sup>37</sup>

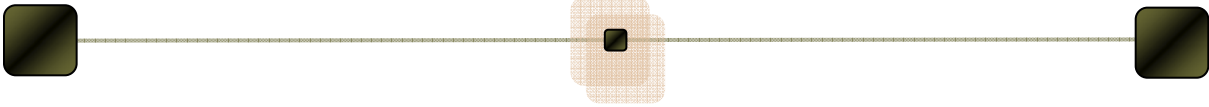
More troubling, a local study found that in Nebraska's youth correctional facilities at Geneva and Kearney, 63 percent of girls and 90 percent of boys were diagnosed as having mental health or substance abuse treatment needs. These data reinforce anecdotal data from the juvenile justice system that youth crime is directly tied to untreated mental health or substance abuse issues.

**Mental Health Symptoms Among Youth Offenders at Nebraska's Youth Rehabilitation and Treatment Centers at Geneva and Kearney**



Source: Herz, D. C. & Poland, A. L. (2002, January). *Assessing the Need for and Availability of Mental Health Services for Juvenile Offenders, Executive Summary*, (p. 7) University of Nebraska at Omaha, Department of Criminal Justice.

Estimates, based on national patterns, suggest that more than 2,000 juvenile arrests in Douglas County each year involve young people who need treatment for mental health issues or substance abuse. The county documented that 22 percent of arrests were directly related to drugs or alcohol. There is wide acknowledgment, however, that other offenses, such as theft and violence, are occurring because of substance abuse.



Left untreated, mental health issues follow the youth into adulthood. Some 35 percent of adult offenders in Nebraska had behavioral health treatment needs at the time of their arrest.

## ***Community Resources to Address Adolescent Behavioral Health Needs in Omaha***

Omaha offers a relatively broad, high-quality network of mental health services. There is a varied and active array of alcohol and drug prevention programs, and an increasing interest in early detection and prevention of mental illness in young children.

Two key gaps exist. The first is information regarding youth needs. Omaha's youth advocacy and service groups have expressed frustration about the lack of information measuring behavioral health needs. Their day-to-day experience tells them there is an unmet need for treatment, but they are unable to find broad, accurate data to document that need. To address this concern, a coalition of groups has been lobbying school districts for increased participation in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, and the **Alegent Health Community Benefit Trust** has formed a Juvenile Mental Health Planning Team to plan next steps.

The second major gap is the region's lack of an adolescent mental health crisis intervention and care facility. Families with a child who is experiencing a mental health or substance abuse crisis often feel they have nowhere to turn. Policymakers, providers, and parents agree that "In a crisis, we don't have anywhere to call for assistance."

Interviews with community leaders revealed that the Omaha region used to have approximately 60 beds for acute inpatient mental health care for adolescents, but that the number is now down to 20. As a result, waits for mental health services in area emergency rooms can exceed 2 days. Recent efforts to reopen the Richard Young Centers did not address this need for adolescent beds.



## **Strategic Priorities**

The goals of the *Addressing Adolescent Behavioral Health Initiative* are to:

- Improve the quality of information available about Omaha area behavioral health needs.
- Provide better support services to families of youth with mental health and substance abuse issues.
- Expand the continuum of adolescent mental health care in Omaha to include crisis intervention and support.

To accomplish these goals, we recommend establishing an *Addressing Adolescent Behavioral Health Task Force*. Possible strategic options for the Task Force include:

### **Encourage greater participation in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey.**

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey is a reliable and valid instrument that is used nationally. Policy decisions regarding the allocation of scarce resources cannot be made in the absence of accurate data about youth's needs. Similarly, having access to Omaha-specific data enables social service organizations to develop programs that are tailored to the unique needs of the population.

### **Create an adolescent mental health care facility.**

Youth and families need an appropriately staffed facility, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to which they can turn for immediate mental health assessment, intervention, and inpatient care in a crisis. Although the specific capabilities and functionalities of the facility are yet to be determined, we expect that the facility would provide immediate mental health assistance, including

- crisis intervention;
- crisis counseling;
- mental health assessment;
- referrals to community agencies; and
- short-term inpatient beds.



## Financing Higher Education

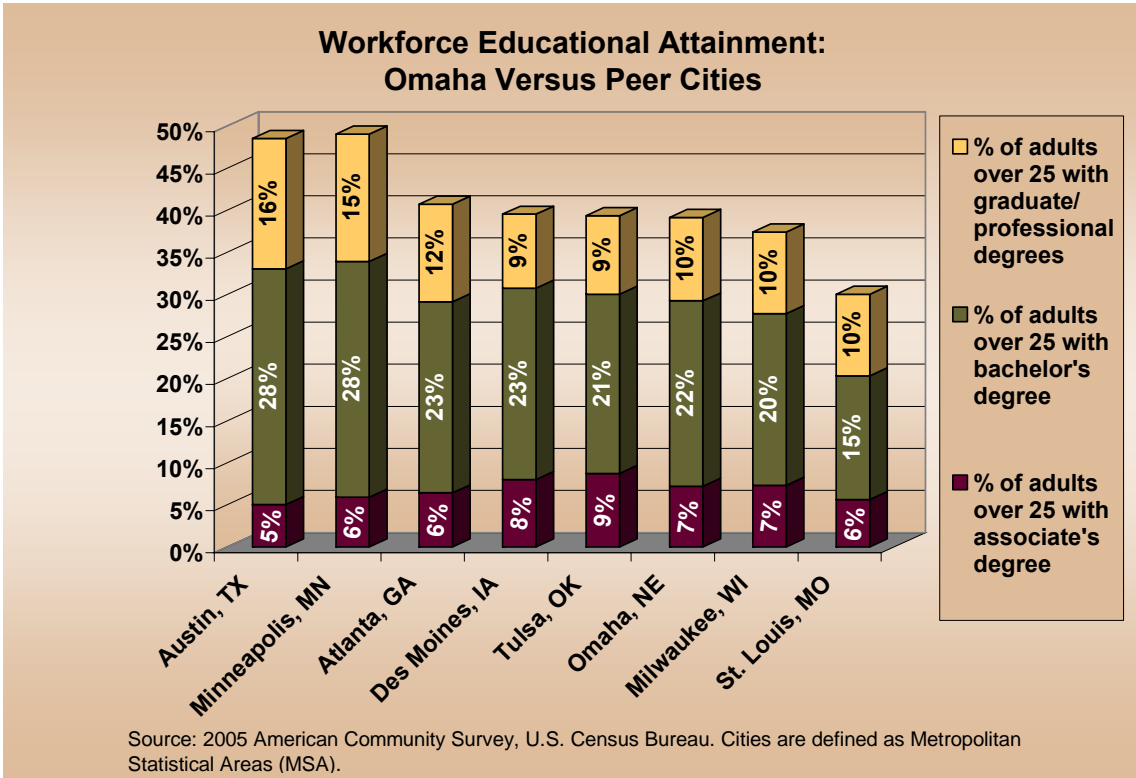
*Increasing access to higher education is essential for the future of Omaha. Yet, rising costs coupled with insufficient financial assistance diminish the opportunities for youth to pursue higher education. The goal of the Financing Higher Education Initiative is to give confidence to Omaha's graduating seniors that there will be financial resources for them to continue their education after high school at technical and professional schools, colleges, and universities.*

### Scope of the Challenge

*Omaha has an economic imperative to increase enrollment in and graduation from higher education.*

Increasing the educational attainment of the workforce is an economic imperative for Omaha. Fundamental changes in the global economy have made workforce education and skills a top competitiveness factor for cities, states, and the nation. Omaha's strong economic growth over the past decade has been driven by expansion in sectors that require knowledge workers, including the information and communications technology, financial services, and medical services industries.

Although Omaha has steadily produced and attracted a workforce with rising levels of educational attainment, Omaha lags behind a number of competitor and peer cities in the percentage of adults over 25 with higher education degrees.



To ensure the long-term competitiveness and economic prosperity of the region, Omaha’s business, education, and community leaders would do well to increase the number of the high school graduates who enroll and persist in higher education.

*Increasing access to higher education can provide a pathway out of poverty for individuals and their families.*

The rise of the knowledge economy has increased the wage premium for workers who are highly educated and skilled. In Omaha, as in the rest of the country, individual income is directly correlated with the level of education achieved. In 2005, an Omaha resident with a bachelor’s degree earned, on average, almost \$15,000 more per year than someone with only a high school diploma. Those with graduate degrees earned roughly \$11,500 more each year than those with bachelor’s degrees, and \$26,500 more than high school graduates.

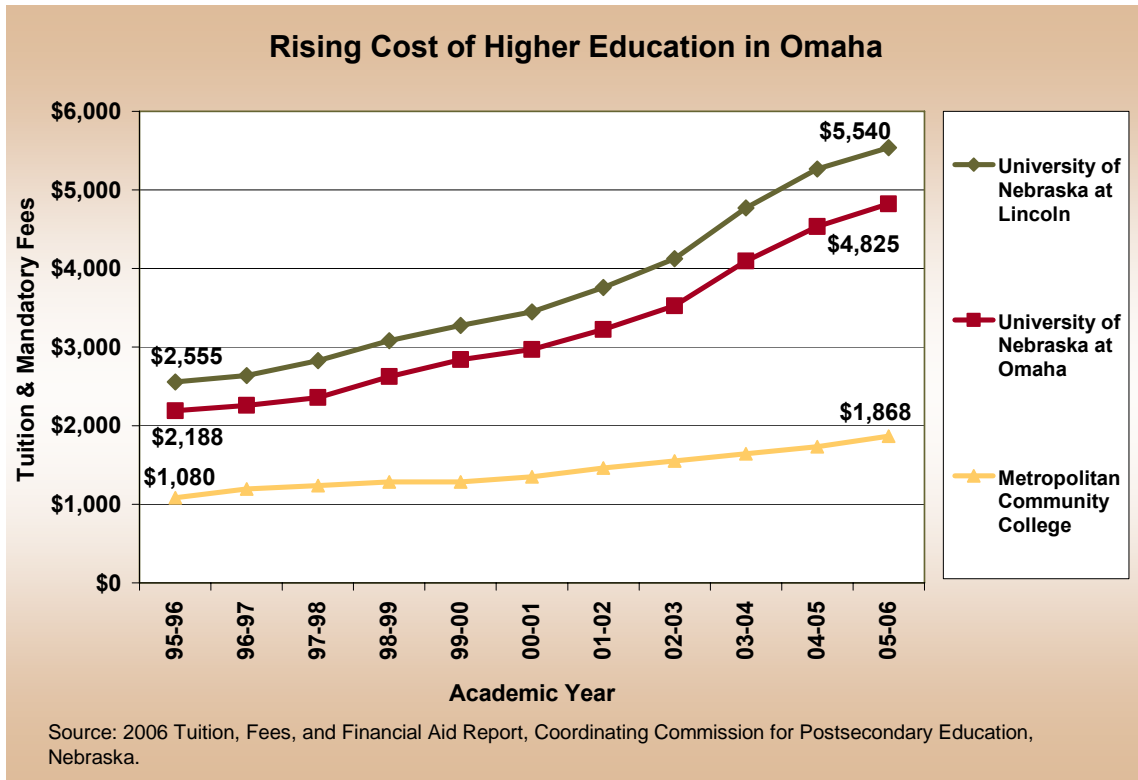
Economic Status of Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area Residents, by Education Attainment, 2005		
	Poverty Rate*	Average Earnings Over 12 Months
Less than high school graduate	23.4%	\$18,928
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	13.9%	\$24,108
Some college or associate's degree	9.9%	\$28,863
Bachelor's degree	6.2%	\$38,848
Graduate or professional degree	2.7%	\$50,320
* Population 25 years and older. Source: 2005 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau.		

It is also evident that poverty is inversely correlated with education. As the education level rises, the poverty rate drops sharply. In the Omaha-Council Bluffs area, almost a quarter of adults (those 25 years and older) who dropped out of high school are in poverty. Thus, providing resources and increasing opportunities for youth from low-income families to pursue higher education can be one of the most cost-effective pathways out of poverty for individuals and their families.

*Just as the importance of higher education has increased, the cost of attending public colleges and universities in Omaha has risen faster than the national average.*

Across the nation, rising college costs since the mid-1990s and the increasing financial burden on families and students of the middle class have received much attention. Mirroring the national trend, the costs of attending public colleges and universities in the Omaha area rose dramatically over 10 years. Consider the following:

- Between 1995 and 2005, resident tuition and mandatory fees to attend Metropolitan Community College (MCC) rose 73 percent, compared with a 65 percent increase among community colleges nationwide.
- During the same period, the cost for residents of attending the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) increased by 121 percent, compared with a 95 percent increase at 4-year public institutions across the United States.
- The cost for residents of attending the University of Nebraska at Lincoln (UNL) rose 117 percent during this period, higher than the national average of 95 percent.



The costs of tuition and fees at MCC, UNO, and UNL have also been rising faster than the median family income in the region. Nebraska's Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education found that the percentage of family income needed to support undergraduate tuition and mandatory fees is increasing, especially for medium-, low-, and very-low-income students. The rising cost of attending college can place higher education increasingly out of reach of those with limited financial means.

*Grant aid has not kept up with rising tuition costs, resulting in record high student borrowing that places a severe future financial burden on students.*

For decades, the federal Pell Grant has been the backbone of the financial aid package for low-income students to attend undergraduate institutions. However, the Pell Grant has not kept up with rising tuition costs, especially over the last decade. IN the 1995-96 academic year, the average Pell Grant would have paid for 69 percent of the tuition and fees for full-time, in-state students at UNO. In 2005-06, the average Pell Grant paid for only 52 percent of the tuition and mandatory fees at UNO.<sup>38</sup> Not only are

students left to pay more of the tuition, but they also must bear the considerable costs of room and board, books, and other supplies.

Students and their families are increasingly turning to loans to pay for college. Nationwide, undergraduate students take on 50 percent more in loans than they did 15 years ago. In Nebraska, a full-time, in-state undergraduate in the bottom quartile of family income borrowed \$4,900 in 2003-04 and carried a cumulative \$12,200 in student loans.

The size of student loans now represents a huge financial burden on many young people immediately after graduation, impeding their ability to accumulate assets and become financially secure. Students at public 4-year institutions, of course, borrow more than students at public 2-year institutions, because of the higher tuition rates at 4-year institutions. Students from low-income families borrow more than their peers from higher-income families to pay for higher education. The families of low-income students are also less able, or likely, to help pay off these loans.

***The bottom line: Rising costs coupled with insufficient financial assistance diminish the opportunities for low-income youth to pursue higher education, thereby reducing their prospects to launch well-paid careers and climb out of poverty.***

Across the school districts in the Greater Omaha area, there are nearly 2,000 high school seniors whose family incomes are low enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Those students have the greatest need for financial assistance for higher education, but whether they move on to college depends in large part on the availability of financial resources. Consider:

- Less than half of low-income OPS students enroll in some form of postsecondary education (including colleges, universities, trade schools, or work-related training) after graduation, in contrast to 70 percent of their more advantaged peers.
- More than half of OPS students who did not pursue higher education cited “the need to save for college” as a key reason for delaying enrollment in postsecondary education.<sup>39</sup>

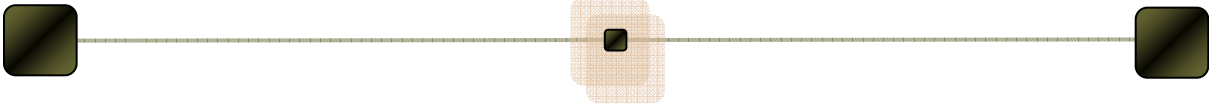
Students Receiving Free or Reduced-Price Meals in Omaha's School Districts				
School District	Graduation Rate 2004-05	12 <sup>th</sup> -Grade Enrollment 2005-06	Percent on Free/ Reduced- Price Meals	Est. 12 <sup>th</sup> Graders on Free/Reduced- Price Meals
Bellevue	94%	702	22%	156
Bennington	100%	43	10%	4
Douglas County West	96%	83	28%	23
Elkhorn	96%	288	7%	21
Gretna	99%	139	6%	9
Millard	94%	1,637	9%	139
<b>Omaha</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>2,571</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>1,366</b>
Papillion-La Vista	92%	692	16%	107
Ralston	90%	218	34%	74
South Sarpy	100%	88	12%	11
Westside Community Schools	94%	467	20%	94
<b>Total</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>6,928</b>		<b>2,004</b>

Source: Nebraska Department of Education.

*The good news: Students respond when offered sufficient financial incentives to attend college.*

All of Omaha's youth can benefit from a large-scale, needs-based scholarship program that gives them the promise of a college education if they work hard, graduate from high school, and obtain admission to one of the region's postsecondary institutions. Across the country, such large-scale scholarships are already emerging, and they are making an enormous impact on high school graduation and college enrollment. Below are two examples.

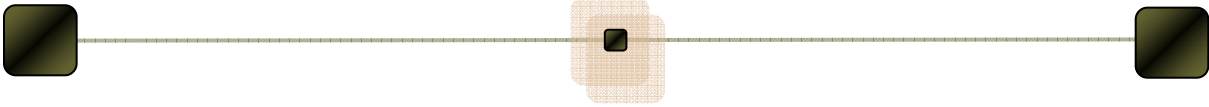
- **Georgia's HOPE Scholarship.** In 1993, Georgia initiated the HOPE Scholarship, which is funded by a state lottery. The program pays for tuition and fees at Georgia's public colleges for state residents who maintain at least a B average in high school and in college. A study comparing college enrollments in Georgia with those in other southeastern states found that HOPE increased total freshman enrollment in Georgia's colleges and universities by almost 6 percent over a 10-year period (1988-97).<sup>40</sup> As a result of the scholarship, enrollment among African-American students increased by 15 percent, and enrollment among white students increased by nearly 4 percent.

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- ***The Kalamazoo Promise.*** In 2005, anonymous donors created a philanthropic fund that pays up to 100 percent of the college tuition and fees for graduates of Kalamazoo's three public high schools. To qualify, students must attend a community college, state college, or university in Michigan. Virtually overnight, this promise has transformed how a small and economically disadvantaged community<sup>k</sup> sees itself and its future prospects. The statistics in just 1 year show the stunning impact of the program.<sup>41</sup>
  - In the year before the program began (2004-05), 265 students dropped out of Kalamazoo's public high schools. The very next year, when the program began, only 21 students dropped out.
  - In June 2006, 400 students graduated from Kalamazoo's three public schools, and 80 percent took advantage of the Promise.
  - In 2006-07, 23 students who had dropped out of high school reenrolled.
  - Of the 2006 graduating class, staggering numbers of eligible students enrolled in college and received Promise scholarships: 93 percent of African-American girls, 84 percent of African-American boys, 88 percent of Hispanic girls, 82 percent of Hispanic boys, and 90 percent of white boys and girls. These enrollment numbers are much higher than the national averages across all races.<sup>42</sup>

An alternative to scholarships is the individual development account (IDA). IDAs are dedicated, matched savings accounts that encourage low-income families or individuals to save, build assets, and, in this case, pay for postsecondary education. Financial education for parents and students fuels the use of these programs by underscoring the need for savings and asset-building. Private and public funds can be used to match the funds contributed by students and their families. The state of Kentucky is considering the following IDA program, which is designed to generate savings for postsecondary education:

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<sup>k</sup> The population of Kalamazoo is estimated at 77,000. Roughly two-thirds of public school students qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

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- The **Cradle to College** initiative would provide a college savings account for every child born in Kentucky. The state government would fund each account with enough money to attend a community or technical college, and parents could contribute additional funds. To withdraw the money without attending college, students would be required to perform 1 year of full-time military or community service. Currently, a Cradle to College Commission made up of government, business, academic, and social activism leaders is refining the initiative and identifying long-term financing options.


## ***Community Resources to Provide Resources for Higher Education in Omaha***

In addition to federal and state dollars such as Pell Grants, several scholarships are available in Omaha. Some of these scholarships are merit-based and some are needs-based.

**The University of Nebraska** provides scholarships through a number of programs. In 2005-06, some 1,300 UN freshmen received scholarships that were valued at more than \$3 million. Many of the UNO scholarships available to Omaha students are merit-based. The largest needs-based scholarship that benefits minority students is the Goodrich Scholarship, which was awarded to 75 incoming freshmen in the 2006-07 academic year. Metropolitan Community College also offers a number of scholarships that are based on need and on merit. Other needs-based scholarships available to Omaha students include the G. Robert Muchemore UNO Scholarship and scholarships offered through the EducationQuest Foundation.

Across the city, youth-serving programs such as **All Our Kids**, the **Boys and Girls Clubs**, and the **Solomon Girls Center** have included college scholarships as an important program component, to be awarded to youth who have completed the program and graduated from high school. As one example, All Our Kids supports its participating students with college scholarships worth up to \$5,000 annually.

In addition to these scholarships, several small IDA programs are operating successfully in Omaha. These programs are managed by the **Family Housing Advisory Service** and the **United Way's Family Economic Success Initiative**. The organizations partner



with a number of banks, including Bank of the West and Great Western Bank. Both organizations are funded by grants plus local matching funds.

But taken together, existing scholarship and other resources fall far short of what is needed by low-income high school graduates in Omaha to pursue postsecondary education. Of the 6,928 12<sup>th</sup> graders enrolled in the 11 Omaha Metropolitan Area school districts in 2005-06, nearly 2,000 were from low-income backgrounds. Another 100 low-income students will be graduating from Omaha area parochial schools. These are the students who need the promise of financial assistance for postsecondary education.

## ***Strategic Priorities***

The goal of the *Financing Higher Education Initiative* is to give hope and confidence to Omaha's graduating seniors that there will be financial resources to continue their education after high school. The promise of financial assistance will provide a powerful incentive for students to attain higher achievement levels in school; graduate from high school; continue with postsecondary education; and earn technical, undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees.

We recommend that a *Financing Higher Education Task Force* be established to address the issue of securing financial resources for higher education for graduating seniors in Omaha. We also recommend that the Task Force consider the following strategic priorities to reach the goal of the initiative:

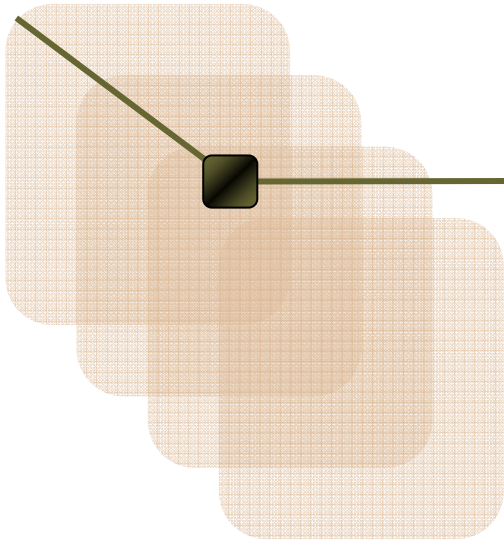
### **Establish an endowed scholarship fund.**

Create a permanent, needs-based college scholarship program that will benefit a large number of economically disadvantaged youth in Omaha. Needs-based scholarships are a powerful means to motivate students from disadvantaged backgrounds who otherwise cannot see the promise of a college degree in their future.



**Create a matching college savings account program.**

This program would provide a college savings account vehicle with matching funds for youth and their families to save for higher education. Families could sign a contract with the program, agreeing to contribute regular amounts to the account, participate in financial education programs, and follow other requirements. Access to the account could be restricted for a certain amount of time and the funds used only for education-related expenses. Failure to follow the contract would mean losing match dollars.

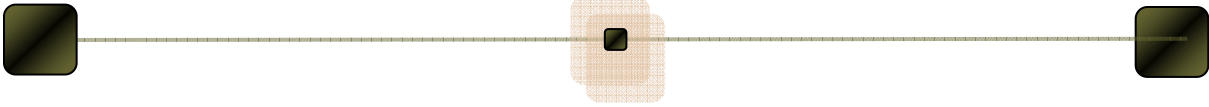


# Implementation Structure and Plan

*This Master Plan is meant to be a starting point for a concerted community-wide effort to address the key gaps and meet the challenges involved in ensuring that all youth in Omaha succeed. The strategy is straightforward: Bring together the data and inventory of resources outlined here with the relevant community resources—people, organizations, and dollars—to adopt or modify the suggested strategic priorities and begin work on putting them into place.*

This document, then, is not a road map to be followed blindly. Priorities will have to be set—not everything can be done at once, implementation details about which organizations can support which efforts will need to be decided, and funds will need to be raised or applied for. These decisions can be made only by community leaders working in well-organized Task Forces and armed with the best possible information.

This section of the Master Plan lays out an approach for taking the next steps to convert this document into an action plan to ensure that all Omaha youth succeed. The section will:

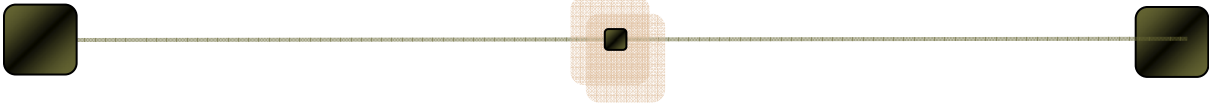
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- Outline a proposed organizational structure, including a management plan and a list of proposed Task Forces.
  - Recap the strategic priorities that will provide a starting point for Task Force deliberations.
  - Provide a concrete example of the kinds of milestones each Task Force will adopt to guide its first year and a half of implementation activities.
  - Outline a monitoring, evaluation, and reporting plan.

## Organizational Structure

The proposed structure is designed to address youth development needs as effectively and efficiently as possible, and to incorporate as many stakeholders as is reasonable while retaining a high degree of program integration and coherence.

The core of the organizational structure is a set of **Task Forces** designed to tackle each initiative area (e.g., *Making the Most of Early Childhood*) and consider the suggested strategic priorities (e.g., ensure that all children eligible for Head Start receive high-quality early care and education). The Task Forces will include relevant community leaders and organizational stakeholders, although each will vary in size and composition as a function of the nature and breadth of the identified tasks. Each Task Force will have a chairperson with the knowledge and standing to lead Omaha's effort in the area.

The work of the Task Forces will be coordinated and supported by the office of the **Executive Director**. Most funding for individual initiatives will flow through this office, which will accept funds from various sources and disburse funds through carefully structured and administered grants and contracts. In some cases, rules associated with funding mechanisms may call for direct relationships between funding sources and implementing organizations. The office of the Executive Director will also manage public affairs.



The Executive Director and the Task Force chairpersons will be assisted by an **Implementation Design Team**, which will support the work of the Task Forces and help coordinate the initiative. Specific tasks of the Implementation Design Team will include:

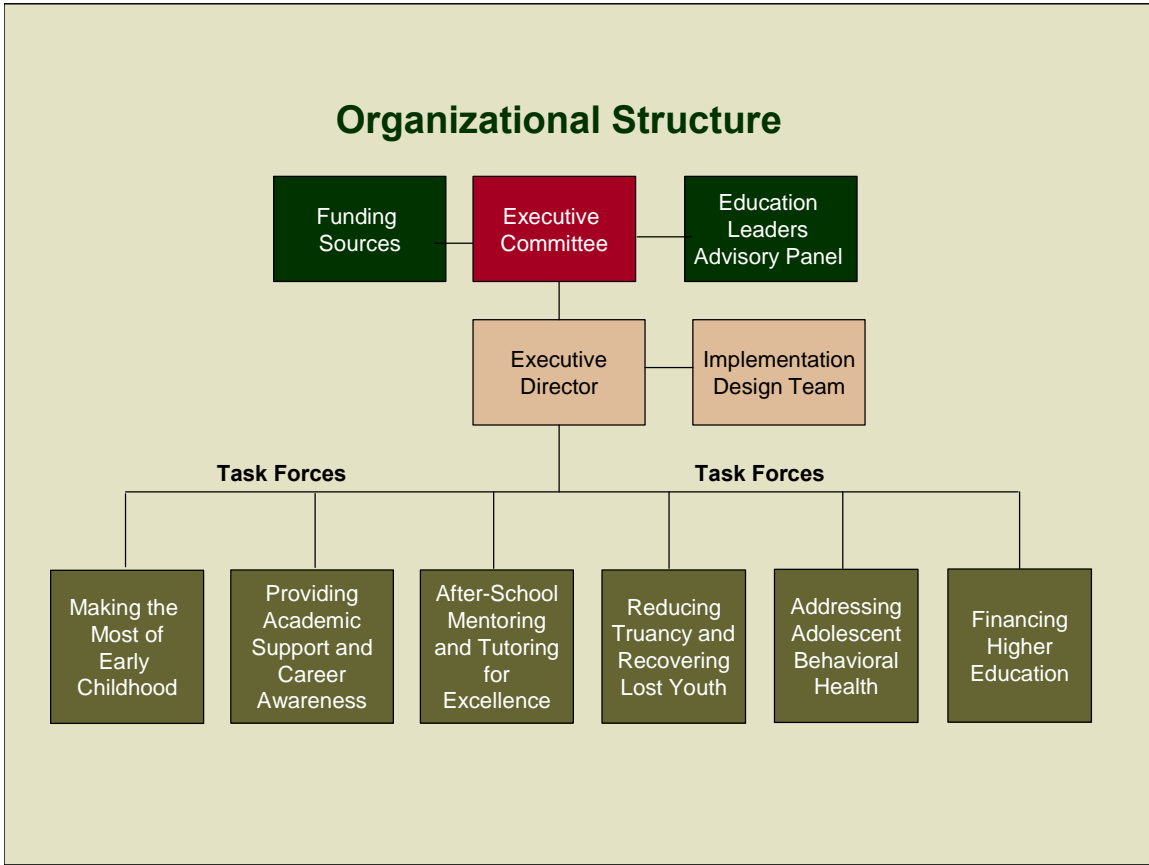
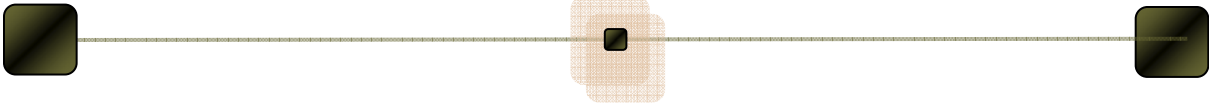
- Providing needed research and analysis.
- Working with Task Force chairpersons to build detailed implementation plans.
- Sharpening, modifying, or adding strategic priorities to address the needs a Task Force identifies in its area.
- Refining cost estimates and identifying other resources needed to execute Task Force plans.
- Advising on fund-raising and resource allocation.
- Preparing RFPs, developing grant selection criteria, and assisting in the technical review of proposals.

The Executive Director will report to the **Executive Committee**, presenting results achieved and future activities planned for the Committee's review, refinement, and adoption. The Executive Committee, composed of a group of Omaha's community leaders, will oversee and review all program activities, monitor progress, and make adjustments as necessary.

The Executive Committee will also be responsible for overseeing fund-raising efforts for the initiatives. Funding will be sought from individual donors, family foundations, community foundations, national foundations, City of Omaha government agencies, State of Nebraska agencies, U.S. government agencies, corporations, and business associations.

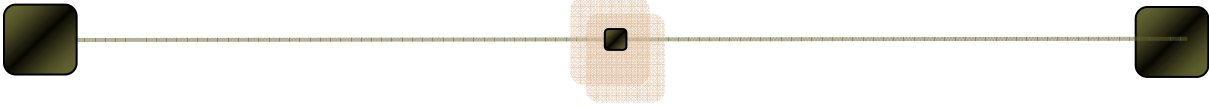
The Executive Committee will be assisted by the **Education Leaders Advisory Panel**. This group will be composed of the superintendents of the 11 Omaha Metropolitan Area school districts and the presidents of the local colleges and universities. Members will review Task Force findings and make recommendations to the Executive Committee.

The diagram on the next page portrays this organizational structure graphically.



**Proposed Task Forces and the Strategic Priorities to Be Addressed**

<b>Task Forces</b>	<b>Strategic Priorities</b>
<b><i>Making the Most of Early Childhood</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that all children eligible for Head Start receive high-quality early care and education.</li> <li>• Expand education and training opportunities for child care providers.</li> <li>• Monitor the quality of child care in Omaha.</li> <li>• Implement a proven parent education program.</li> <li>• Explore the potential for a community-wide effort to provide child care providers with benefit packages.</li> </ul>
<b><i>Providing Academic Support and Career Awareness</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide extended time for struggling learners in elementary schools.</li> <li>• Explore a Career Academy high school redesign strategy.</li> <li>• Ensure that all youth have access to a fully qualified professional counselor.</li> <li>• Develop and implement a common data system.</li> <li>• Communicate career opportunities and pathways.</li> </ul>
<b><i>After-School Mentoring and Tutoring for Excellence</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that all youth have access to a fully qualified professional counselor, a tutor, as well as an adult mentor.</li> <li>• Develop and implement a common data system.</li> <li>• Create a formal, citywide network of youth-serving organizations.</li> <li>• Establish a mechanism for providing ongoing assistance to youth development organizations.</li> <li>• Develop the next generation of youth-service providers.</li> </ul>
<b><i>Reducing Truancy and Recovering Lost Youth</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a common truancy enforcement protocol for Douglas/Sarpy County schools.</li> <li>• Develop a pilot truancy intervention program that incorporates evidence-based best practices.</li> <li>• Evaluate truancy approaches currently in use.</li> <li>• Roll out truancy intervention programs in middle and high schools.</li> <li>• Develop and implement a program of individualized services delivered by professionals.</li> <li>• Increase information sharing among public and private agencies to better coordinate youth services.</li> </ul>
<b><i>Addressing Adolescent Behavioral Health</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage greater participation in the Youth Risk Behavior Survey.</li> <li>• Create an adolescent mental health care facility.</li> </ul>
<b><i>Financing Higher Education</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish an endowed scholarship fund for economically disadvantaged youth in Omaha.</li> <li>• Create a matching college savings account program.</li> </ul>



In recognition of the important role played by religious organizations in the Omaha community, religious leaders will be included in the Task Force process. The reasons for inviting religious leaders to participate in the Task Force process include:

- **Capacity and reach.** The religious community represents the strongest and most widespread system of community and social organizations in Omaha, including more than 500 churches, temples, synagogues, and houses of worship representing 66 different faith traditions.
- **Relevant experience.** Outside of worship services, Omaha's faith institutions are engaged in a broad range of social programs serving adults and youth in different communities throughout the metropolitan area.
- **Precedents for collaboration.** In response to community needs, both chronic and acute, a number of interfaith organizations and initiatives have emerged in Omaha, including the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, Omaha Together One Community, and Together Inc. of Metropolitan Omaha.

We envision that each Task Force will include members from the religious community, as well as other community and social organizations in Omaha, to promote caring, social trust, and positive support for youth success in all of Omaha's communities. The goal would be to involve these organizations where their proximity to the community and their high level of respect and trust would be especially important. Collaboration with the Omaha religious community and with other local community and social organizations will be an important component of the following Task Force objectives and activities:

- public awareness and outreach;
- identification of at-risk youth;
- community representation;
- family counseling;
- resource development; and
- advocacy.



## Implementation Process

Implementation will proceed in stages. The office of the Executive Director has already been established and is up and running. The Executive Committee has been named. Background data collection is complete, and the results are included in this volume. The Task Forces are likely to collect additional data to sharpen their proposals.

The next step is the public presentation of the Master Plan, followed by the formation of the Task Forces. Each Task Force then will begin meeting. The Implementation and Design Team will formally brief the Task Forces, presenting the relevant background data and strategic priorities for each Task Force's consideration. The Task Forces will charge the Implementation and Design Team with further analyses as needed and will begin to seek input from appropriate stakeholders in the community. From the outset, potential funding sources will be identified and steps will be taken to secure funding. Strategic priorities will be addressed as quickly as possible—although we assume that some will be dealt with more quickly than others.

Throughout the process, a series of public outreach and communication activities will be conducted. Also, Task Forces will submit quarterly progress reports to the office of the Executive Director for presentation to the Executive Committee.

Each Task Force will be asked to develop a detailed set of milestones and a timetable for its work. Since the appropriate work plan and schedule for each Task Force will depend on the specific initiatives undertaken and resources available in its area, they are likely to vary across groups. However, to provide an example for the Task Forces to consider, and to guide and accelerate their adoption of a work plan, we provide a sample set of milestones for the *Making the Most of Early Childhood Task Force*.



## Sample Milestones for the *Making the Most of Early Childhood Task Force*

### Months 1-2

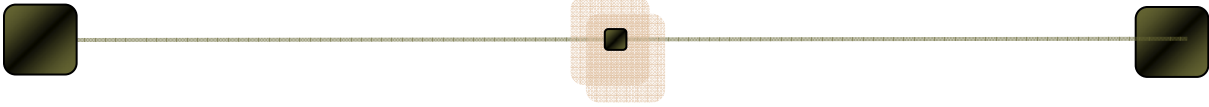
- Convene Task Force to review tasks, timeline, and initial program recommendations.
- Convene a summit of all key providers and child advocates in Omaha and at the state level to begin to obtain input, consensus, and support for the initiative.
- Disseminate findings from effective, evidence-based practices regarding high-quality child care and programs directed toward improving the quality of providers/teachers.
- Begin meeting with potential institutional partners (operating foundations, ongoing programs, and related institutions) to discuss their input and roles in program elements.
- Collaborate with Educare and Head Start leaders to coordinate activities and provide support as needed.
- Sharpen cost estimates and develop plans for fund-raising.

### Months 3-4

- Conduct focus groups of elementary school principals and kindergarten teachers in high-priority schools on the topic of school readiness.
- Finalize list of community resources needed for improving child care quality and providing parenting programs.
- Identify target communities.
- Finalize initiative and program components.
- Set beneficiary targets, resource requirements, and funding from federal, state, and other sources.
- Secure funding for first-year program rollout.

### Months 5-6

- Reach agreement with key institutional partners on implementation of program components.
- Set up program implementation infrastructure: management, staffing, fund distribution, results reporting and other accountability mechanisms, etc.

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- Roll out programs where infrastructure is already in place (e.g., T.E.A.C.H. scholarships and Quality Enhancement Pilot Project grants), and provide technical assistance for implementation.
  - Conduct feasibility study of establishing a low-cost employee benefit package pool for child care providers.

### **Months 7-8**


- Roll out Quality Rating System.
- Roll out Parent Education Program.
- Implement community-based early childhood training programs.
- Finalize evaluation design to demonstrate outcomes for program elements.
- Pursue funding from federal, state, and other sources.
- Present findings and recommendations on the feasibility of sequenced training and education credit transfer between 2-year and 4-year institutions to allow more teachers to obtain a bachelor's degree in early childhood education.

### **Months 9-11**

- Manage and monitor program activities.
- Implement impact evaluation activities, as input for pursuing federal, state, and other funding.
- Continue to pursue federal, state, and other funding for program elements.
- Finalize arrangements to transfer program management to appropriate institution(s).

### **Months 12-18**

- Continue to monitor implementation.
- Evaluate and announce progress of initiative in first 18 months.
- Secure sustainable funding for all programs.
- Provide technical assistance to the implementing institution(s) as needed.



## Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting Plan

The Implementation Design Team will prepare a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system to track the progress of all the Task Force work. The Omaha community will be investing significant financial and human resources into this work—it is imperative that programs be held accountable for results. This system will be submitted to the Executive Committee for review, refinement, and adoption. The core of the system will consist of quarterly and annual reports that will include the following information:

- Major activities undertaken during the previous quarter.
- Progress and results achieved, tracked against previously set milestones.
- Problems encountered, and steps taken or proposed to address them.
- Activities planned for the subsequent reporting period.

In addition to technical reports, the office of the Executive Director will prepare quarterly financial reports, taking note of overall program financial items such as funds received, funds expended, accruals of grantees and contractors, etc. To prepare these quarterly statements, grantees and contractors will be required to submit compatible technical and financial reports. The Executive Director will submit the quarterly reports to the Executive Committee for review and approval.

The Implementation Design Team and the Executive Director will advise the Executive Committee on whether an independent evaluation of the entire effort is appropriate and, if so, how it should be structured.

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