

Bill Milliken - Founder of Communities In Schools, Visits Richmond

In a city where thousands slip away from school -- whether as dropouts or truants -- school officials believe the mentoring and other support volunteers from Communities in Schools provide can make a difference.

The program has been in Richmond since 1996. It works with more than 2,000 kids in 24 schools, and school officials hope to broaden its reach.

"It's about having a caring adult with each child to make sure services all come together," said Harold Fitrer, assistant superintendent for administration and support.

A connection like that is at the heart of what Communities in Schools founder Bill Milliken says is needed to keep kids from dropping out.

But the program in Richmond involves more than mentoring.

Most recently, the city school system, Communities in Schools and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have joined forces to open a program targeted at high school students who have fallen behind in credits and are trying to catch up while juggling other demands, such as parenthood or a job.

The program, called the Performance Learning Center, has 70 students, some of whom Fitrer expects to graduate this year -- instead of dropping out, as he feared they might.

"It's a fantastic thing for us," said Lisa Dawson, School Board vice chairman. "They do everything that you need when you need."

Besides the learning center, Dawson said Communities in Schools' work in linking families with needed services they might not have known about has made a big difference in Richmond.

Richmond schools need help keeping kids from dropping out, officials say.

Milliken says two key steps are bringing mentors into schools and offering after-school programs.

A third key is to pay attention to the health of children -- making sure they get medical and dental examinations as well as drug and alcohol education, for example.

Fourth, Milliken says, is to focus on the future, making sure children learn skills they'll need to make a living or have a chance to prepare for college.

Finally, he argues it is key to give children a chance for community service.

Milliken founded Communities in Schools in 1977. It operates in 200 communities in 27 states. Chesterfield County also participates in the program.

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