

Clayton Collaborative Authority Community Assessment

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Executive Summary

In order to develop a relevant and precise strategic plan focused on the youth of Clayton County, the Clayton Collaborative Authority gathered detailed information about county demographics, family data, school-related statistics, public and private resources available in the county, and citizen perceptions of local needs and assets.

Clearly, Clayton County is different in 2007 than it was in 1997. The county is more ethnically diverse and economically challenged. Over 70% of the school population is low-income, and nearly 40% of its children are being raised in single-parent homes. The county's population is highly mobile. Its schools are struggling. Childcare is extremely limited. Parents and students report that there is virtually no affordable afterschool programming for youth. Gangs abound. The teen birthrate is high and rising.

However, under the surface of this negative image of the county are individuals, clusters of committed citizens, and community organizations and agencies that are committed to making good things happen. Some of them have been working quietly and effectively for a number of years; some are brand-new. The juvenile courts and DFCS have become state and national models of effectiveness. The local university has begun to provide significant resources in the areas of planning, leadership, and direct service. A number of well-established youth-oriented nonprofits such as Hearts to Nourish Hope, the Forest Park Street School, and the Kinship Care Resource Center have a significant and growing presence. Churches such as Jonesboro First Baptist and New Birth South are committed to community service. And a surge of new initiatives, many of them inspired by grassroots leaders trained through the Clayton County Extension Service, is underway.

But most of these programs and services don't know about the existence of the others, or they have only vague hints of what is being done and by whom. There is no information clearinghouse, no place that coordinates initiatives, no public space that points to the places where hope and help are taking root. This is the role that the Clayton Collaborative Authority plans to fill.

Using an asset-based model of community development, the Collaborative will create a multidimensional system encouraging collaboration and empowering community. Local youth will be integral to this plan, helping county and neighborhood leaders identify and prioritize what should be done and how it might best be accomplished. Youth will both experience and create change.

Introduction

The Clayton Collaborative Authority was established in 1997 by an act of the Georgia General Assembly to address needs of children, youth, and families living in Clayton County, Georgia. The Collaborative believes that social and economic health and growth are dependent on interaction among citizens who know, respect, and trust one another. Consequently, the goal of the Collaborative is to provide opportunities for citizens to exchange ideas and resources and to promote progress through coordinated action.

In December 2006 the Board of Directors of the Clayton Collaborative Authority voted unanimously to make youth in our county the Collaborative's number one priority. Consequently, our community assessment emphasizes those factors which have the most impact on our youth. The following document is organized in accordance with the risk and protective factors described by the federal initiative entitled Helping America's Youth (<http://www.helpingamericasyouth.gov>)

Problems are seldom evenly distributed across a geographic region. The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) provides some information on the county by superregion and census tract. But those units are awkward for plotting current community organizations and needs identified by local citizens. Therefore, this assessment typically evaluates the community by zip code—locating strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in areas familiar to everyone. Zip codes provide sufficient precision to focus initiatives efficiently where specific needs and resources have been identified.

Data Sources.

Risk and protection factors operate on several levels: individual, family, school, peer group, and community. To evaluate problems and available resources on all these levels, information was gathered from the public and private sectors, from nonprofit organizations, neighborhood groups, and individuals in leadership positions.

Demographic data came from a variety of sources, including the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, the Atlanta Regional Commission's county and census tract databases, the Community Sourcebook of ZIP Code Demographics (2004), Reference USA, and two zipcode websites—BrainyZIP and ZIPSkinny. One caveat about statistical data is that they vary from one source to another, partly due to different data collection dates and partly due to different methods of tabulating categories. This community assessment usually reports the most current numbers or numbers from the most reliable sources (e.g., U.S. Census Bureau information).

Data on families came from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, the KIDS COUNT database provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and Clayton County's Department of Family and Children's Services. Additional information on families came from the Clayton County Extension Service and the Clayton County Juvenile Court.

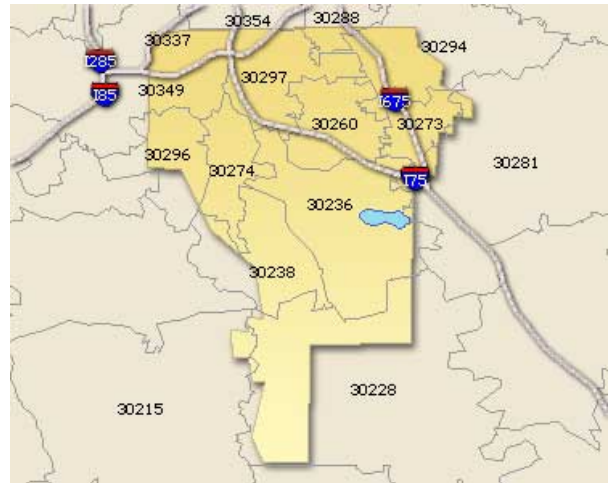
School information was collected from the (Georgia) Governor's Office of Student Achievement 2005-2006 K-12 Public Schools Annual Report Card, Clayton County Public Schools 2007 Blue Ribbon Commission on School Discipline, a county-wide survey of PTSA leaders, and student feedback from four of the more problematic high schools in the county.

Information about issues with individuals and specific groups of youth was gathered from nonprofits working with youth in the county--including the Forest Park Street School, Hearts to Nourish Hope, and Clayton County's Kinship Care. Opinion surveys of students attending Clayton State University, most of whom live in or around Clayton County, were also included.

Demographic Characteristics

Geographic Location.

Clayton County is a suburban county considered part of metro Atlanta. Situated in the Southern Crescent, it is flanked on the west by affluent, educated Fayette County and on the east by rapidly growing, middle class Henry County. On Clayton County's northern border is Hartsfield-Jackson, the world's busiest airport, the City of Atlanta's oldest and largest landfill, and some of the poorest neighborhoods inside the City of Atlanta. Clayton County contains an ample supply of medium density housing, some undeveloped land, and an interstate highway and spur providing easy access to other parts of the metro region and south to the other major cities in Georgia.



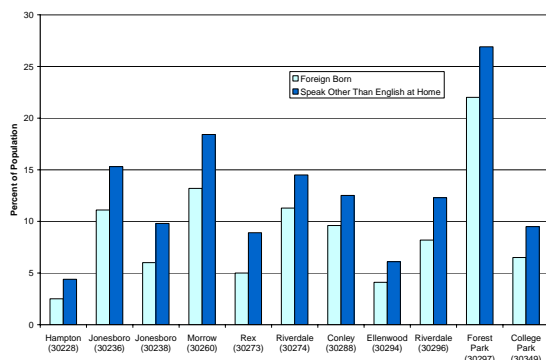
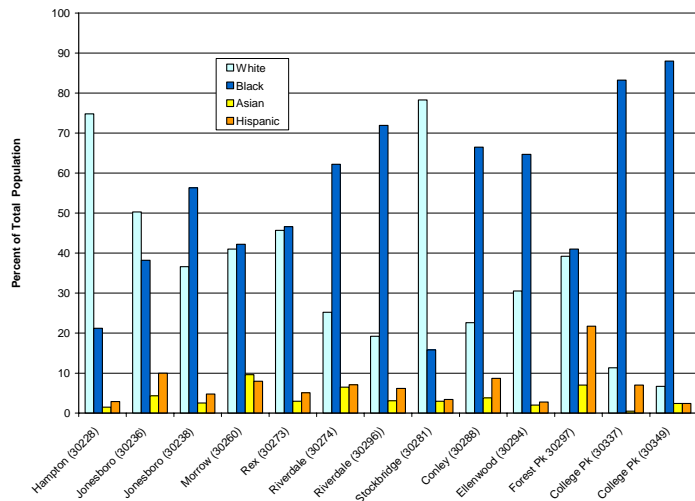
http://homesales.ajhomefinder.com/homesales/county_picked/Clayton/

For the purposes of this assessment, the county will be divided by zip code. The adjacent map shows the boundaries of each zip code area. Information will be introduced in a county-wide format, then broken down by zip code to provide a finer grained analysis. Since most zip code areas in the county include a single town, analyses will frequently refer to the cities rather than to their zip codes.

Population.

Overall, the county's population is growing, up 14.4% from 2000 to 2006³—especially in the southern panhandle of the county, in Jonesboro, and in Riverdale. The highest population density is in Riverdale, perhaps because of its relatively large number of rental units. The northwestern region of the county around College Park has declined since 2000, most likely due to the building of the new airport runway.⁵

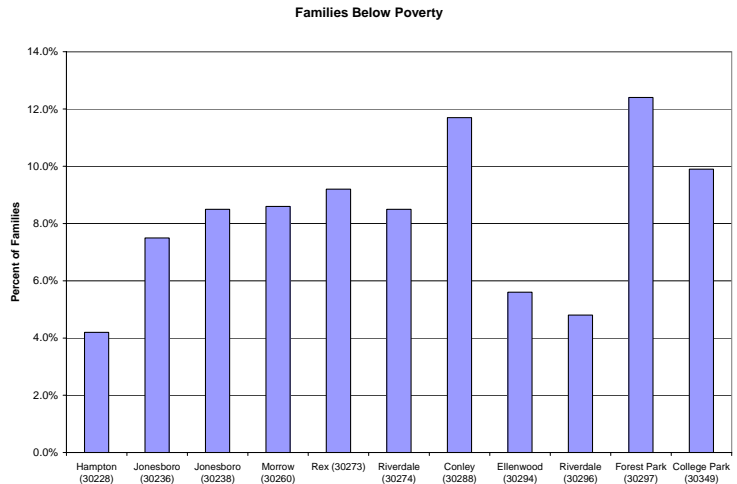
Over the past 15 years the county has seen its population change from a predominantly lower middle class white community to more ethnically diverse, urban, working class families—many of them headed by a single parent. The county's ethnic/racial distribution in 2006 was 63% Black, 25% White, 4.9% Asian, and 11.3% Hispanic.²¹ Only the southern end of the county (represented by the cities of Hampton and Stockbridge) is still predominantly white.¹³



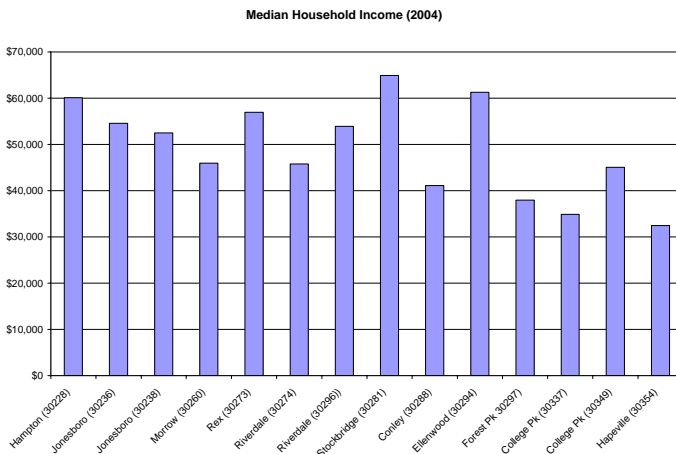
The county is also internationalizing. According to the American Community Survey for 2006, 14.7% of the population is foreign-born and 18.8% of the county reports speaking a language other than English at home. The City of Forest Park has the most ethnically diverse population, with over 20% of its residents foreign-born and various Asian cultures and a rapidly growing Mexican community making up nearly a third of city's population.⁶

Income.

According to the American Community Survey for 2006, the median family income in Clayton County was \$48,076. However, 16.5% of Clayton County’s families with children under 18 fell below the poverty line. Married couples with children were far less likely to fall below poverty (7.9%) than were female-headed households (27.3%). The most significant statistic for the purposes of the Collaborative is that more than 25% of children under the age of 5 and 18.5% of those 5 to 17 yrs old in the county are living in poverty. In other words, about one in every five children in Clayton County is poverty-stricken.



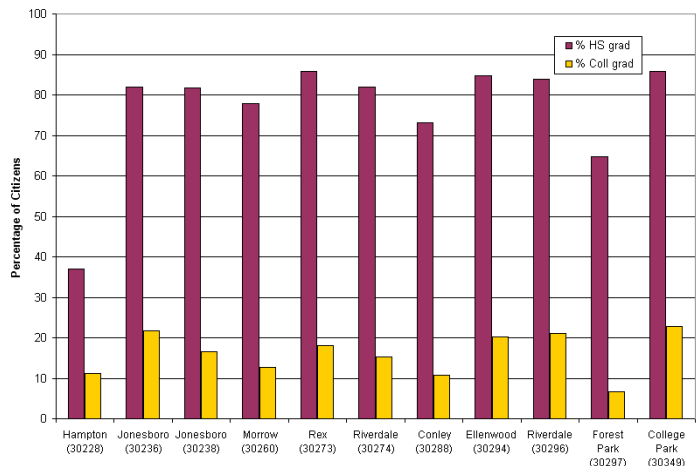
Families in poverty are found throughout the county. Conley and Forest Park have a roughly 12% poverty rate, and parts of Jonesboro (zip 30238) and Riverdale (zip 30274), Morrow, Rex, and College Park have more than 8% of their residents below the poverty line. Only Hampton, Ellenwood, and the 30296 area of Riverdale have under 6% of their residents in poverty.⁶



Furthermore, an income above the poverty threshold (\$13,690 for a one parent-one child family in 2007)²² is not an indicator of well-being, since a significant number of Clayton County citizens above the poverty line meet the criteria for low-income.

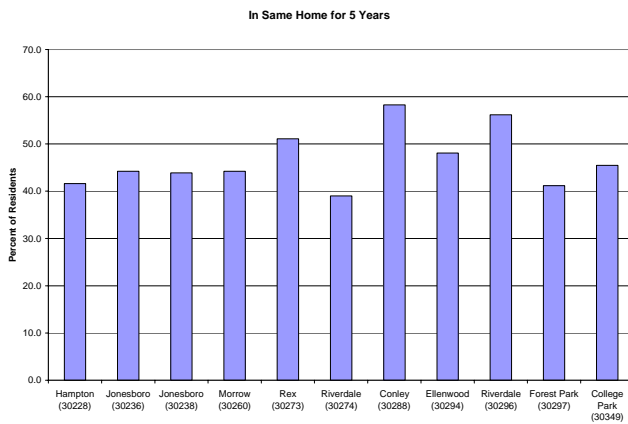
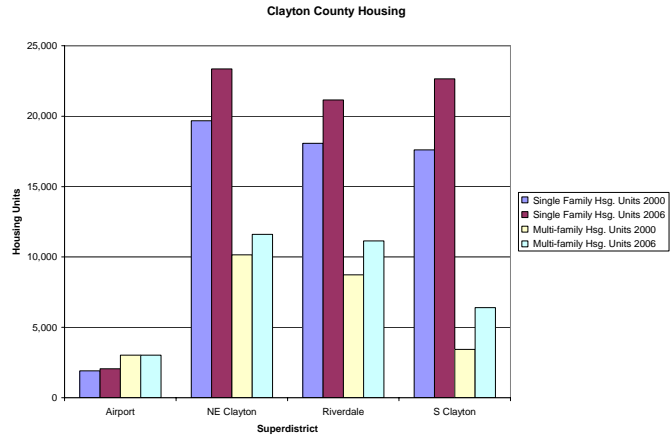
During the 2005-2006 school year, for example, 10 out of the 13 middle schools in the county and one of the high schools (Forest Park High) qualified for Title I, providing disadvantaged students with free or reduced cost lunches.¹⁵ Each year the number of eligible children has been increasing; in 2005 over two-thirds of the children in Clayton County qualified for free or reduced price meals (see graph).¹³

Not surprisingly, the educational level of Clayton County residents is relatively low. Most areas of the county have less than 20% of their population college-educated.⁶ The extremely low percentage of high school graduates in and around Hampton probably reflects the still rural nature of that part of the county. Forest Park’s immigrant population is likely to account for its low rate of high school graduates. Whatever the cause, a community lacking significant numbers of people with higher education is more vulnerable to economic problems and stressors.



Housing.

Owner-occupied housing dominates Clayton County, with the amount of rental housing varying by zip code, from 10.4% in Rex to 47.3% in Forest Park.¹ Every incorporated community in the county, except College Park, has more owned housing than rental units.⁴ County-wide, rental units constitute only a third of the available housing.³ However, mobility is relatively high. Throughout the county, only 50% of residents remain in the same home for five years.^{21,6} The median time in residence for the cities of Riverdale, Morrow, and Jonesboro is roughly between 3 and 3½ years.¹



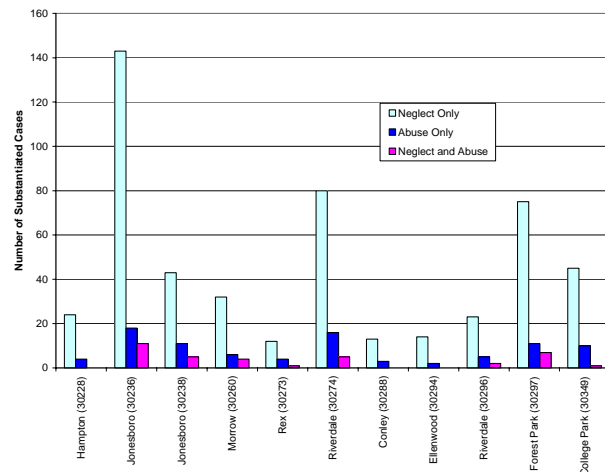
Clayton County has a reputation for attracting low-income residents with housing significantly less expensive than elsewhere in the metro Atlanta area. The average 2005 cost of a new house in Clayton County was \$149,445, compared to \$310,041 in Fayette, \$185,782 in Henry, and \$203,700 in Fulton. Average prices for existing homes showed the same differential: \$118,000 in Clayton, \$234,000 in Fayette, \$144,742 in Henry, and \$212,900 in Fulton.² Despite these reasonable home prices, low-income homeowners have certainly been hurt by the subprime mortgage debacle; Clayton County is reported to have the highest rate of foreclosures in the metro area.¹

For those without the resources or inclination to purchase a home, reasonably priced rental units are available. The county's rental vacancy rate in 2006 was 14.4%.²¹ The median rent in 2006 was \$806 in Clayton County, \$921 in Henry County, and \$949 in Fayette.²¹ The average for a one-bedroom apartment in Clayton is \$686/month compared to \$740/month in Henry County.⁷

Furthermore, the number of multifamily housing units increased from 2000 to 2006. In the superdistrict of South Clayton (which includes Jonesboro and Lovejoy), the number of multifamily units nearly doubled during that period, from 3,431 to 6,407. In addition, the number of multifamily units increased by over a third in the Riverdale superdistrict, from 8,727 to 11,132. In northeast Clayton, the number of units went up only slightly—from 10,147 to 11,598.⁴

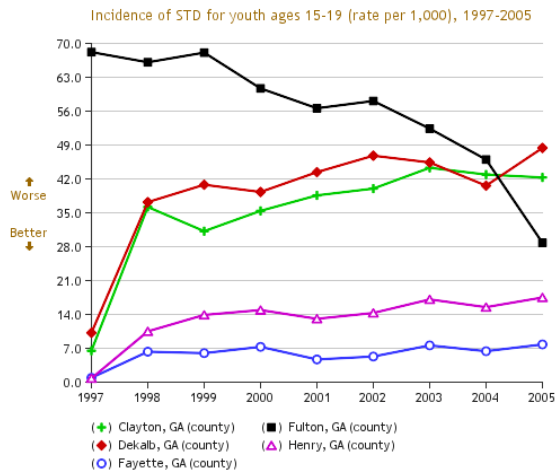
Families

A little over half (53%) of the families living within the county in 2006 have children under the age of 18. Married parents head 53% of these families, while single females head 39%. Worth noting are the 3,748 grandparents living in the county who report being responsible for their grandchildren under the age of 18;²¹ some of these grandparents are being assisted by the kinship care initiative sponsored by Clayton County DFCS, and others are receiving support through the nonprofit Kinship Care Resource



Center in Jonesboro (A.Burda, personal communication, August 29, 2007).

Clayton County DFCS records covering January through December 2006 reported a total of 810 substantiated cases of child maltreatment, but the overwhelming majority of these (655) were neglect rather than abuse. The chart above shows the distribution of cases across the county. Minor discrepancies between the total reported and the chart are due to case records that either report no zip code or give zip codes outside the county.⁸

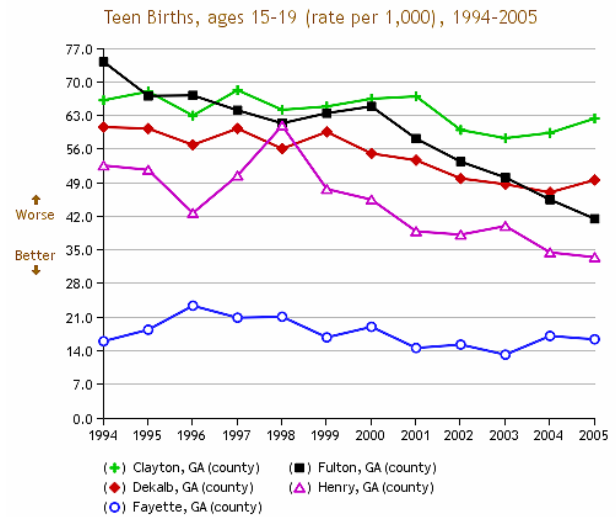


Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) continue to be a problem in the county. As the Kids Count data demonstrate, the number of identified cases has been gradually rising since the late 1990s.¹⁴ Furthermore, since a large percentage of county residents are low-income, the likelihood of teens getting medical attention for an STD is lower than would be the case in a middle income community. Consequently, the actual number of STD cases is probably higher than what is reported.

A significant number of Clayton County children are born to teen mothers. A Kids Count comparison of Clayton and the surrounding counties shows that Clayton County teenagers have the highest birth rate.¹⁴ And they frequently have their babies before the mothers complete high school. This virtually guarantees that the infants will be born into low-

income homes and later will not have the proper educational support needed to succeed in school. Addressing the problem of teen pregnancy in Clayton County is thus essential to improving the quality of life for the next generation of youth. It also suggests that teenagers need guidance and perhaps formal instruction in learning how to parent well.

The Clayton Cooperative Extension Service provides home visits as well as weekly classes (*The ABC's of Parenting*) for teen parents, parents of young children, and parents of teens. One subgroup of participants is required to take parenting classes as a result of DFCS investigations; of the participants with open DFCS cases, 89% have been reunited with family members or have remained intact. (K.Siebert, personal communication, November 15, 2007). The Riverdale nonprofit Hearts to Nourish Hope offers classes (*Parenting with Love and Limits*) for parents of at-risk youth who have been suspended or expelled from school or who have been referred through the Clayton County Juvenile Court. (D.Anglin, personal communication, August 12, 2007).



Schools

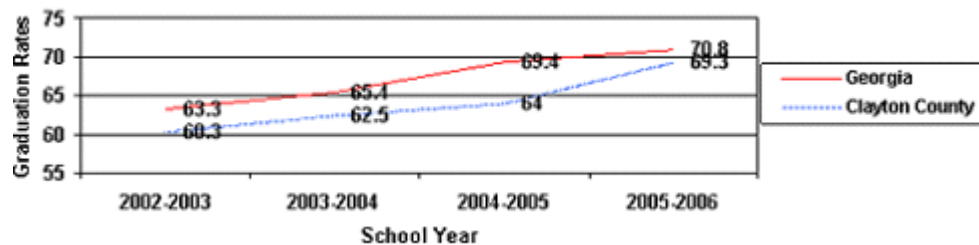
Alongside (and perhaps because of) the demographic shifts described earlier, the Clayton County Public Schools system has struggled to remain effective. Since 1999 the School System has had three superintendents and two interim superintendents. Interpersonal conflicts among members of the Board of Education have been chronic.

In 2003 the Clayton County School System's accreditation was suspended for a year (L.Flannagan, personal communication, November 6, 2007). Although accreditation was restored with the hiring of a new

superintendent, teachers continued to resign. In addition, in 2006 (the latest available data) the Clayton County School System as a whole failed to make the Adequate Yearly Progress mandated by No Child Left Behind.¹⁵

One of the challenges faced by the schools is that of the 51,948 registered students, almost three-quarters of them (73%) are economically disadvantaged.¹⁵ The schools beg for more parental involvement and complain of students lacking academic focus, appropriate social skills, self-discipline, and other forms of support from the home.¹⁸

The absentee rate in the high schools is staggering; according to the Georgia Governor's Report Card, during the 2005-2006 academic year, seven of the eight high schools had over 25% of their students absent at least 15 days; three of the schools had roughly a third of their students absent at least 15 days.¹⁵ Even the high school students themselves recognize the absences as problematic; around 2/3 of the high school students attending a leadership retreat in March of 2007 reported that the number of excused and unexcused absences were excessive.¹² Despite the establishment of a new Truancy Intervention Protocol in August of 2006, law enforcement personnel routinely report clusters of truant teens in apartment complexes, malls, and commercial areas during school hours. (S.Teske, personal communication, November 2, 2007). Correlated with the high absentee rate is a high dropout rate, in 2005-2006 officially at 30% (see below).¹⁰



In the Fall of 2006 the Clayton County Public School System established a Blue Ribbon Commission for School Discipline to evaluate the patterns of problematic student behavior in the elementary, middle, and high schools. The result was a report published in January of 2007. The document states that “high school and middle school students were most likely to be referred for discipline due to failure to follow directions and disrespectful behavior... In contrast, discipline referrals for elementary-level students (grades K-5) were most likely made for displaying disruptive behavior and disrespectful behavior” (p.26). Not mentioned in the text of the report but clear from associated bar graphs which summarize the top ten offenses in middle and high schools is a significant problem with tardiness and trancies; high school data for 2005-2006 alone indicate nearly 3500 cases of truancy, and roughly 1600 reported cases of tardiness.⁹

However, students attending Clayton County Public Schools (and their teachers) continue to demonstrate exceptional educational accomplishments. In 2006 Riverdale High School won the International Technology Education Association (ITEA) Program Excellence Award, and Riverdale's students were State Champions of the Georgia Technology Student Association.¹⁹ Jonesboro High School students won first place in the National High School Mock Trial Competitions in 2007.¹⁷

Youth-Related Crime

Juvenile crime has been an increasing concern for several years, with an Anti-Gang Task Force formed in 2005 to address the growing presence of gangs.²⁰ A newspaper article published in August 2007 reported that Clayton County had 46 separate gangs, which puts Clayton behind Gwinnett, Dekalb, and Cobb counties but ahead of the rest of the metro area.¹⁶

However, Clayton County has a nationally recognized program for addressing juvenile offenders. Clayton County's juvenile justice system reports a 50% reduction in detention, an 80% reduction in probation caseloads, a 44% reduction in the detention of youth of color, a 50% reduction in recidivism among probationers, and a

decrease of over 100 kids entering foster care on an annual basis. Its School Offense protocol has reduced the number of referrals from the school to the court by 80%, minimizing the criminalization of kids for acts that are normal within the standard model of child development. (S.Teske, personal communication, November 2, 2007).

Faith-Based Sector

Churches, large and small, abound throughout the county. Many of them have long-standing community-oriented programs, including food pantries and gently-used clothes closets. Churches provide the evening meal every night at Calvary Refuge Center, the only homeless shelter in Clayton County; the schedule is booked solid with volunteers months in advance. (T. Tarno, personal communication, October 31, 2007). Many churches take community leadership very seriously, and some have become members of the Clayton County Chamber of Commerce.

Youth-related initiatives are almost always included among church outreach ministries. For example, Lion of Judah Family Worship Center in Riverdale holds special meetings soliciting input from teenagers in the community about what they see as the biggest issues they face. Through its Recreation Outreach Center (informally known as the ROC), First Baptist Church of Jonesboro offers youth-oriented social events as well as sports camps, classes, basketball and softball leagues, and wellness seminars to the public.

First Baptist Church of Jonesboro (FBCJ) also provides a food pantry, a clothes closet, and non-emergency medical care to the public through the all volunteer Riley Medical Clinic open one evening each week. In addition, FBCJ sponsors satellite ministries to Hispanics, Laotians, Cambodians, Asian Indians, Vietnamese, and Haitians in the county.

First Presbyterian Church of Jonesboro and First Baptist Church of Morrow jointly sponsor the Good Shepherd Clinic, which since 2000 has provided free medical services to thousands of people in the Clayton County area. According to clinic records, the vast majority of their patients are working people who lack insurance of any kind.

New Birth South recently opened a Community Impact Center in Clayton County which offers frequent public workshops on a variety of relevant issues—including domestic violence, money management strategies and avoiding foreclosures, HIV/AIDS testing, and grief/trauma support. Other community-oriented projects are its Back to School rally helping parents understand how to work collaboratively with teachers, mentoring programs in selected public schools, and teacher appreciation luncheons.

Many churches offer their facilities to immigrant groups (most visibly to Vietnamese and Latinos), and storefront churches with particular missions exist throughout the county. However, again there is no central place where people can find out about them.

Recreation

Although the county has built several new community centers over the past five years, parents report that they are not available to the majority of county residents. One reason is financial, since fees are charged for participating in the programs. Recreational programming provided by individual cities (e.g., Forest Park) also costs. Low-income residents, especially if they have more than one child, cannot afford the fees.¹⁸

The other dimension of inaccessibility is logistical; the C-Tran bus service recently introduced in the county has a limited number of routes, and some of the new community centers can only be reached by car. Even if the bus were available, many parents feel that would remain a safety issue, since they do not feel comfortable with their children riding public transportation without adult supervision.¹⁸

Currently, Clayton County has no facility associated with national youth organizations such as the YMCA and the Boys and Girls Clubs. There are parks throughout the county, but they are unsupervised and have occasionally been the site of gang violence and bystander shootings.

Citizen Opinion

PTSA Leaders.

In September 22, 2007, fifty-seven leaders of Parent-Teacher-Student Associations (PTSAs) representing almost all the schools in Clayton County were surveyed. Part of the survey included two open-ended questions: “What do youth and/or their families need that they are currently not getting?” and “What ideas do you have for improving the opportunities for young people in the county?” The answers were strikingly consistent.

Almost everyone expressed a county-wide need for well-organized, supervised, afterschool and weekend programming for youth. The requested programs need to be upbeat, easily accessible, and low cost, since many parents have more than one child to pay for. A number of leaders recommended content such as leadership training, life skills development, mentoring, community building, and guided group discussions of topics selected by the youth themselves. Very few respondents listed any youth-oriented programs already in place in the county.¹⁸

The second theme emerging from the PTSA survey responses was a need for more support to and commitment from parents—including structured classes addressing child development, what parenting involves, how to discipline children appropriately, and how to help children succeed in school. Family-friendly social activities held in local neighborhoods were suggested, as well as the need for greater parental involvement in the schools. Several leaders believed that requiring parents to volunteer a certain number of hours in the schools each semester could benefit all children.¹⁸

A third theme was the need to improve the overall sense of community in the county. Citizens don’t know what is available to them and their children, they don’t know how to access needed resources, and they don’t know one another. Particularly in areas of the county which are more ethnically diverse, shared experiences and community building opportunities are needed. A message repeatedly seen in the survey responses was the need to be more upbeat and positive when talking about the county and its citizens, because negativity breeds fear and isolation.¹⁸

Students.

At a Leadership Retreat held in early March 2007, students from four county high schools (Forest Park, Mt. Zion, North Clayton, Riverdale) and the Perry Center for Alternative Education were given the opportunity to describe how they felt about their schools. Complaints about filthy bathrooms with no soap or toilet paper and crowded lunchrooms serving bad food were followed by concerns about violence (including gangs and guns), inappropriate sexual behavior on school grounds and teen pregnancies. Depending on the school, between 80% and 90% of the participants reported that many students fail classes and/or are incarcerated. The students recommended that principals and other administrators provide more opportunities for open communication with students, and took upon themselves the responsibility of developing plans to clean up their schools.¹²

During the fall semesters of 2006 and 2007, college students enrolled in Human Services courses at Clayton State University were asked to write down their responses to the question: “How can we make Clayton County a good place to live?” Their recommendations included:

- establishing afterschool programs and youth centers where youth have input about programming related to personal and community issues (e.g., gangs and sex).
- improving school performance through mentoring, providing more opportunities for hands-on learning, and different forms of tutoring.

- initiating community policing so that youth get to know the police on a personal level, perhaps through social events in apartment complexes and block parties.
- forming neighborhood associations and watch groups, with parties and regular meetings where people really get to know one another.
- training people to work with gang members, making the schools safer (through more School Resource Officers)
- improving bus transportation to special events and places where good things happen
- sharing positive stories about public service workers, private citizens, and neighborhood initiatives.¹¹

Summary

Clearly, there is much to do related to youth in the county. Because the awareness of needs is so widespread and citizen response is already underway, members of the Collaborative see coordination and encouragement of these initiatives as the greatest service the organization can provide. Its 3-Year Strategic Plan (2008-2010) will identify and prioritize those activities that the Collaborative is best positioned and prepared to do.

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