

"The graduation rate is probably better than it's ever been," Bounds said.

And it's not that Mississippi is worse than any other state. Nationwide, dropout rates are similar to the state's numbers.

The problem is more complicated than dropping out of high school, though. High school itself just isn't enough anymore to make it in a global economy based on high technology and ever-evolving transformations.

"Now that we are really understanding this issue, we can understand and see what the real problem looks like," Bounds said. "I just think I have a moral obligation to make this a focus of the state, to wage this war."

While politicians, educators, pundits and other adults debate how to solve the dropout crisis, the kids are angry.

"Teachers actually say 'They don't pay me enough to do this.' They don't want to be there," said Adam Dearman, 17, who dropped out of Seminary High School earlier this year.

Cameron Clark, 16, wanted to move on with her life. She wants to be an embalmer and plans to attend junior college to meet that goal. Forrest County Agricultural High School already taught her everything it could, she said, and she left school this year.

"I don't count myself as a dropout. I withdrew from school - I didn't drop out."

But Mississippi does count her as a dropout.

high school obsolete

A Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation-funded study that explored why kids drop out found 47 percent of dropouts said classes were not interesting and 69 percent said they were not motivated.

Gates got the shocked attention of the nation's governors in 2005 when he told a gathering of them that high school was obsolete.

Students are not learning what they need to learn to work for international companies immersed in high technology, he said. The problem goes beyond secondary school - more Americans need to finish college and engage in intellectual challenges to propel the nation into the future.

But before that need can be addressed, more kids must finish 12th grade, experts say. To keep them engaged and make them marketable, a major overhaul is needed. American high schools need updating - call it High School 2.0.

Mississippi is in the middle of a high school redesign. Bounds said it is a move that will make high school relevant.

"There will be lots of strands that look alike - what we do with technology, what we teach teachers to counsel students and explain opportunities," Bounds said.

Some things will vary for each school district. Schools are different sizes and different regions in the state have their own needs. For example, Lamar County schools are incorporating economics into the curriculum at every level to help students make better choices.

the experts

Part of the redesign has to include more guidance for students, even building it into the required curriculum, national experts say.

Effective comprehensive guidance has three components, said Norman Gysbers, an expert in the field and a professor at the University of Missouri.

First, the curriculum should include knowledge about career opportunities. Second, the school should work with each student and his parents to develop a personal plan of study in middle school. Third, the school should provide special help when it's needed on a short-term basis.

"The focus is on a living plan initiated in high school," Gysbers said.

An example is Navigation 101, a program in the state of Washington that has had great success. A program of comprehensive guidance should be an ongoing quest, not a one-time determination, Gysbers said.

"Plans change," he said. Guidance should never lock students into only one option they can't escape. Kids have to feel as if school matters in their life and actually makes a difference, Gysbers said.

"If students feel connected to school, they are going to do better," he said.

Different programs and curricula are available based on the research of Gysbers and others who have examined the need for decades. An example is the extensive yet intuitive Career Choices course used in many schools across the nation, but not in Mississippi because strict state guidelines don't leave room for a new subject. Career Choices incorporates English and math skills with "life planning." That program promotes the idea of a 10-year plan starting around eighth grade with dreams and visions and morphing into a strategy for the next phase of learning after high school. By contrast, many existing programs just concentrate on getting through the four years of high school.

The challenge is getting comprehensive guidance implemented into the curriculum.

"If we have to concentrate on basics, how do we get extras in?" Gysbers asked. He said that is a common concern of school administrators already loaded with heavy state and federal requirements.

Ideally, the developmental process begins in elementary school.

"It's really too late by high school," Gysbers said. "That kind of effort takes a lot of time and resources."

Other experts agree. It takes parents as well as teachers and schools that care about the individual kid.

"When you connect a student to an adult, it builds relationships, it helps him build goals," said Gene Bottoms of Atlanta, senior vice president of Southern Regional Education Board and founding director of High Schools That Work.

Any dropout prevention plan has to be more than about holding more students in school, but at the same time that is one of the obstacles.

"You can't do much to get them engaged if they aren't in school," Bottoms said.

"We have a very high failure rate in grade nine," he said, adding that part of this is because of a high student-to-teacher ratio and part of it is because it's often teachers with the least experience who teach freshmen high school classes.

The more experienced teachers often teach Advanced Placement classes to smaller classes in higher grades. Bottoms wants to turn the whole system around.

He thinks one reason for the dropout rate and the ninth-grade failures is because current high school requirements load up on academics in the ninth grade. Some students have to take two math classes, for example. One is remedial if their math scores are too low and one is required for them not to get left behind.

Keeping boys interested is another large problem, Bottoms said.

"We're losing male students at a higher rate than young ladies," he said.

Schools need to change the experience for teenagers. In the ninth grade, there should be a practical class with hands-on applications, either in fine arts or technology that allows kids to get up out of their seats and interact as they put academic skills to work. That's one idea.

Another idea Bottoms has is to offer catch-up classes so students have another opportunity to pick up a required class without becoming so hopelessly behind they don't choose to stay.

Hattiesburg High is considering something along these lines with online courses that could meet the need.

"We have got to redesign the curriculum in ninth grade," Bottoms said. "Do less tracking and sorting. Enroll more kids in AP classes. Don't wait until 11th grade to start tech classes. Improving the high school completion rate is as much about changing adult behavior as it is about changing student behavior."

Bottoms describes a high school in San Antonio, Texas, that had bullet holes in the walls and looked and felt like a prison. The school administrators eventually turned to Boys Town, a Nebraska-based nonprofit organization, for help.

"They did a 180-degree turnaround," Bottoms said. The difference? Treating the students as individuals.

"They don't sense adults respect them," Bottoms said.

Schools that want to change need a district that supports them. Mississippi's dropout prevention program is a step in the right direction, Bottoms said.

"Hank (Bounds) has a handle on things. Accountability has to give as much importance to completion as to achievement."

where are parents?

A lack of parental involvement is at the root of many dropout stories.

"Parents do not get involved," Bottoms said. "And there's not very good mechanisms for poor parents to get involved. Better-off parents who are educated know how to work the system."

It's not only one thing that needs fixing. It's many things. Bottoms suggests leadership training for principals and teachers to start.

"This will cost some money," Bottoms said. "Look at your prison costs. You are either going to make your investment now or pay for it later."

Josh Bullock, meanwhile, is still angry but not unmotivated. The former Oak Grove student is getting his GED, looking for a part-time job and planning to attend junior college to study computer science, maybe something in game design.

School just got in the way of his plans.