

Trading one bus for another

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The Choice Bus, a school-prison bus program designed to motivate high school students to complete school and graduate visited Stanhope Elmore High School last week.

Photo: Special to The Indy

By [BRIAN HODGE](#)

From editorial writers' talk of a "school to prison pipeline" to reports of alarming high school dropout rates on newscasts there has been significant discussion about deterioration in educational systems around the country. Since 2008, State Farm Insurance and the Mattie C. Stewart Foundation have impacted more than 2 million students in 20 states about this issue through a program called The Choice Bus.

The display consists primarily of a school bus, the back half of which is painted to resemble a prison bus. A grant by State Farm provides The Choice Bus the opportunity to visit schools, along with the InsideOut Toolkit. Each Toolkit contains a Teacher's Guide, a Stay in School Pledge Card and the InsideOut documentary—a 26-minute DVD that exposes the real story of the devastating and lasting effects of dropping out of school, told by those who live with the consequences every day: prison inmates.

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Alabama is no stranger to this half-classroom, half-prison cell mobile experience. Since 2008, nearly 20,000 Alabama students have boarded The Choice Bus.

Roughly every 26 seconds across America, a student drops out of high school, according to organizers of the Choice Bus. The period between semesters at the winter break is often when students drop out. The Choice Bus is the nation's first mobile experience dedicated to reducing the dropout rate by showing students the power of their choices.

Dr. Molly Killingsworth, a former Assistant Principal at Stanhope Elmore High School, said in her experience the program is a powerful motivator.

"I've received several emails from teachers stating students were really impacted by The Choice Bus. When students see individuals who made bad choices as teenagers, and ended up in prison, it's a more powerful impact than the teachers explaining to them what they should and should not do. Bringing the Choice Bus to Stanhope Elmore is one of the various programs being implemented to help increase the graduation rate.," Killingsworth said.