Provide Alternative Pathways to a Diploma

Supporting Research

Alternative forms of education are often effective at meeting the needs of students who are challenged by traditional school settings. GradMinnesota recommends expanding alternatives for students aged 17 to 21, such as earning credit towards a diploma for engaging in workforce opportunities, Adult Basic Education, and GED honors option. Currently, funding for young people to obtain a high school diploma is only available through 21 years of age. GradMinnesota recommends raising the age of funded diploma attainment for students facing significant education gaps to 23 years old, a practice consistent with most developed countries.

What is the research evidence supporting this recommendation?

Many students do well in traditional middle or high school education settings. These "brick and mortar" settings are characterized by a structure that typically includes predetermined courses, a set schedule, five-day week, and content that includes lectures, assignments and tests. However, there are also many students who struggle to achieve and obtain a diploma in traditional school settings. In Minnesota, for the class of 2017, 82.7% graduated with a diploma; yet 8.6% (5,676) dropped out or had unknown status and nearly 6,000 more students were continuing in school beyond the standard four years. Many of these students are known as "disconnected youth;" adolescents and young adults between the ages of 14 and 24 who are neither working or in school (Burd-Sharps & Lewis, 2017). In Minnesota, 48,700 youth ages 16-24 are considered disconnected – and numbers are disproportionately greater for urban, minority, immigrant and low-income youth (Depaoli, Balfanz & Bridgeland, 2016).

Fortunately, options other than traditional public schools are increasing. These options include charter schools and alternative schools, homeschooling, online programs, postsecondary enrollment options, work-based learning, dropout recovery programs and more. Oftentimes these experiences more clearly show students the connection and relevance of education to their future – increasing their engagement in learning and the likelihood of earning a diploma.

Students who have been pushed out, stop out or drop out of school can benefit from alternative education options. Research shows that many of these young people want to return to school and continue their education, but do not have the knowledge or means to do so (Hurst, Kelly, & Princiotta, 2004). Research shows the main reasons for dropping out of school can be both academic and non-academic (Bridgeland et al. 2006; Rennie Center, 2012). Academic reasons include
- Lack of curriculum that is interesting or relevant to the future
- Poor academic "fit" with school, including mode and pace of instruction
- Grade retention, difficult school transitions, and weak academic skills
- Chronic absenteeism, causing students to fall behind in schoolwork

Nonacademic reasons include
- Life events outside of school, such as health issues, pregnancy and parenting, family concerns,
- Negative school climate, including a disruptive or unsafe school environment
- Wanting or needing to work to earn money
- Disciplinary removal from school or incarceration

Given the multiple reasons why youth leave school, it is imperative to account for individual needs and offer learning opportunities that go beyond traditional modes of teaching and learning.

This document highlights some of the programming strategies that are effective to ensure youth at risk complete school. These include flexible scheduling, self-paced learning, multiple means to earn credit (e.g., earning credit for work experience or project-based learning), and partnerships with post-secondary institutions (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Rennie Center, 2014). Several promising approaches available in Minnesota are also noted. Delivery models vary, but importantly, these alternative options expand the number of viable pathways by which students may earn a diploma and prepare for college and career success.

Promising Practices

A policy brief published by the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy compiled information on promising practices to address the needs of disconnected youth. This section is adapted from their report (Rennie Center, 2012).

1. *Maintain a focus on students' future after high school*. Many students who leave high school before graduation do so because of financial obligations. In response, it is important that programs focus on young people's future after graduation by using real-world, career-oriented curricula. These programs also integrate youth employment programs and workforce preparation. Some programs partner with nearby community colleges to incorporate college-level coursework, maintaining a focus on future education opportunities.

2. *Allow individualized and flexible academic programs*. Out-of-school youth may have several non-academic reasons for leaving school, including pregnancy or childcare, incarceration, health problems, or caring for family members. To address returning students' needs, recovery programs offer flexible schedules and year-round learning, including open-entry and open-exit policies so youth may begin and finish programs at any time. They also may allow academic credit recovery and accelerated program options. A portfolio of options offers an ncreased range of program choices, such as online, early morning and evening classes, or dual enrollment with community colleges.

3. *Take a needs-based and supportive approach*. Previous negative school experiences may leave with a lack of motivation, requiring immediate engagement and consistent encouragement to cultivate their initial optimism about returning to school. To do this, needs-based assessments can be used to properly identify and serve returning youth through a case management model. Staffing a program with committed adults is a key element of the work, and recovery programs include well-qualified and committed teachers who assist students in navigating the demands of school and life. These programs also incorporate clear codes of conduct and increase student and parental involvement in education.

4*. Integrate or link to community organizations*. Schools and districts are not designed to address the myriad non-academic needs of many disconnected youth. Extensive support programs and wraparound services—typically through partnerships with community agencies, health centers, statewide services, or community colleges— are critical to ensure students are ready to learn. Many programs also partner with businesses in the surrounding community to provide job training and maintain a focus on post-high school careers.

Tailoring Programs to Meet Student Needs

Research suggests effective education programming includes identifying the social, economic, and psychological barriers students face and creating individualized and supportive learning experiences that employ specific strategies to meet student needs (Rennie Center, 2012). For example, student data can be used to differentiate segments of need, disaggregating students into groups such as "off-track and enrolled" (students who are behind their grade cohort in terms of credit accumulation), "on-track but separated from school" (usually determined by life circumstance such as caregiving for family members), and "off-track and older" (students who have been separated from school and were academically behind when they left). Using this data, targeted instructional and support strategies based on students' academic level and life circumstances can be developed (Rennie Center, 2014).

Alternative Programs

Quality alternative programs can provide rigorous education and a supportive environment that nurtures student success (Aron, 2006; Lehr, Tan & Ysseldyke, 2009). The National Dropout Prevention Center (2003) has identified best practices of alternative schools, including 1) a maximum student/teacher ratio of 1:10; 2) small student base not exceeding 250 students; 3) clearly stated mission and discipline code; 4) caring faculty with continual staff development; 5) school staff having high expectations for student achievement; 6) learning program specific to the student's expectations and learning style; 7) flexible school schedule with community involvement and support; and 8) total commitment to have each student be a success.

State Approved Alternative Programs (SAAP) in Minnesota

Minnesota's alternative education programs aim to provide viable educational options for students who are experiencing difficulties in the traditional system. According to the Minnesota Department of Education' website, "the first legislated State-Approved Alternative Programs (SAAP) began in 1988 with four sites. Today, more than 162,000 students access alternative education on a part-time or full-time basis." Minnesota's SAAPs are classified as Area Learning Centers (ALC), Alternative Learning Programs (ALP), Contracted Alternatives, and Targeted Services for students in kindergarten through grade 8.

State guidelines posit that the instruction provided in SAAPs is designed to meet individual student learning styles as well as their social and emotional needs. Teachers build connections with students and focus on vocational and career skills, including independent study options. Community, county and state partnerships provide additional support and resources. Each student is to have a Continual Learning Plan (CLP) developed annually for annually for each student to outline the steps necessary for grade promotion and/or graduation (Minnesota Statutes, section 124D.128, Subdivision 3).

Interviews with students in Minnesota who attended alternative programs noted multiple benefits (Konopka Institute, 2009). Alternative programs provide options for nontraditional situations that call for flexibility, including variable school day hours. This flexibility was particularly important for working parents or homeless students. In addition, students across settings favored choices that allowed pursuit of a diploma or a GED. They also note alternative education programs provide them with a sense of belonging, and more relevant and engaging instruction. Finally, many students wanted the public to view alternative education as a valuable means to learning and graduation.

Early/Middle College Programs

Early college high schools and middle college high schools often serve youth who are low income, students of color, first generation college goers, or who are at risk of dropping out of high school. These settings offer students the opportunity to earn post-secondary credits while still in high school and may be housed on a postsecondary campus. National studies have shown that students who participate in Early/Middle Colleges are twice as likely to enroll in a 2 or 4 year college, return for a second year of college and complete a college degree (Struhl & Vargas, 2012).

Minnesota passed legislation in 2014 that allowed "opportunity youth" (specifically students in alternative learning centers) to access Postsecondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) funding and earn dual high school and college credit. Students are considered eligible if they are enrolled in a core school day State-Approved Alternative Program (SAAP) under the graduation incentives program as defined by the Minnesota Department of Education. In 2017, Minnesota had more than 60 Early/Middle College Programs serving students in rural, suburban and urban areas in the state. Statistics show that students of color and American Indian students participated in college courses at dramatically higher rates. For more information on Early/Middle Colleges see the Minnesota alliance for Early/Middle College Success (www.maemcs.com) and Minnesota Department of Education Website (https://education.mn.gov/mde/index.html).

On-line Learning

The pros and cons of on-line learning have been discussed and evaluated as online schooling continues to grow (Ferdig, 2010; Powell, Robert & Patrick, 2015). A 2014 study conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group and co-sponsored by the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) indicated that over 5 million students took one or more online classes in that same year, up 3.7% from the previous year. On-line courses can be useful as part of credit recovery programs and as a means of earning a high school diploma. Advantages of earning a high school diploma online include convenience (no or limited travel), self-paced learning, flexibility (time), learning occurs outside of the school (which may be perceived as unsafe), and specialization; while disadvantages include isolation, limited guidance and support from teachers, cost of equipment, and access to non-accredited schools.

Minnesota public school students may enroll in a full-time online program or they may choose to take supplemental courses (taken in place of a course period during the regular school day). All online courses offered through department-approved programs are: a) taught by Minnesota licensed teachers, b) meet or exceed state academic standards, c) transfer to other public school districts, d) apply toward high school graduation.

In addition, all MDE-approved online learning providers must, as a part of the approval process, outline expectations for actual teacher contact time, student-to-teacher communication, student participation (attendance), and provide definitions for progress, completion, hours online, excused/unexcused absence, and report absence for purposes of compulsory attendance.

Work-Based Learning

Work-based Learning (WBL) provides students the opportunity to learn technical, academic and employability skills by working in a real work environment and has the potential to prepare students for their future careers. Research cited in a report on *Work-Based Learning Opportunities for High School Students* (2013) found that it helps students

- Apply and extend classroom learning, increase motivation and understanding
- Develop critical understanding of the work environment
- Facilitate work readiness
- Explore careers, increase job-related skills and knowledge
- Increase school attendance and reduce dropout

Countries with higher percentages of youth engaging in intensive WBL, like apprenticeships, have higher rates of school completion and participation in post-secondary education than the United States (Bishop & Mane, 2004). WBL programs can differ on several dimensions including: location (on-campus or off); supervision (teachers or employees); time (during or after school hours); compensation (pay or school credit); and participation (individual or in groups) (Stasz & Stern, 1998).

Although rigorous, longitudinal research on WBL has been limited (Hoffman, 2011), many of the studies have provided useful information and researchers seem to agree on several key factors that determine quality programs. Effective WBL programs (see Alfeld, Charner, Johnson & Watts, 2013).

- Are structured and well-integrated with the school curriculum
- Require that students engage meaningfully with the experiences and reflect on their learning
- Have shared learning goals for participating employers and the school instructors
- Have strong links to the labor market to meet employer needs

Work-Based Learning in Minnesota

In 2016, the Minnesota Department of Education published a reference to assist educators in the schools who are involved with work-based learning (WBL) programs. MDE defines work based learning as "formalized learning with instruction occurring at the school and at a community-based setting with an employer in the geographical region of the school. Work-based learning is a collaborative endeavor between a student, his/her parent/guardian, an employer, and the school that engages students in real-world activities. Through school involvement and defined learning, students have the opportunity to earn school credit for the supervised WBL."

The guide describes six types of work experience and career exploration programs for students with and with out disabilities. For example, "Work Experience Disadvantaged Programs" are designed to encourage and improve school attendance by providing students with a work-related experience. This program is designed for students, ages 16 to 20+, who are experiencing difficulties with the regular school program. They may be economically disadvantaged and/or may be identified as potential dropouts, and they may benefit by participating in this work-based learning program. Students are employed in public or private sector jobs and receive a wage as well as school credit for the experience. The guide also provides information about components of a work-based learning program (e.g., training plans, liability insurance, awarding credit), describes roles and responsibilities of those involved, discusses transportation, legal requirements and more.

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