

Provide Alternative Pathways to a Diploma

Youth Voice



Why is this an Important Issue for Minnesota Children and Young People?

GradMinnesota believes in the power of young people to create their own bright future. By listening to their voices, we can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and choices they face. Thus it is important to empower and mobilize youth to share their experiences, bring their perspectives, and give recommendations on issues that affect them. When young people are actively engaged in the decision-making process, programs are more likely to meet their needs and create the changes they desire. While identifying the priority recommendations for GradMinnesota, the GradMinnesota Advisory Council and staff listened carefully to the voices of young people and incorporated their input. The following quotes from young people on effective alternative pathways to a high school diploma were compiled from several sources.

Alternative Learning Programs/Centers offer hope and personalized attention.

"I never did any homework or any other work in class. There were a lot of deaths going on in my family at the time so I didn't really want to think that much about my education... So [after] 6th grade I started to smoke and drink and started doing things that I am not really proud of to this day...I was in my ninth grade year now and still failing and getting into more fights. My school told me if I would get into one more fight then I would get kicked out of school. I didn't really like that idea. That's when I started to realize that I needed to get my education... Without the alternative learning center I don't think I would be graduating this year."-Brian⁴

"ALC schools have a message that no other schools can deliver to their students. ALC schools make you aware that you are welcome; that you can have trust in them, and that you'll fit in among the other students. They don't judge you even if you came from the streets. They give you the hope and encouragement to graduate and move on to better things in life." -Kari¹

Schools providing additional supports are beneficial.

"[This housing program] has been one of the best things that happened to me, actually, honestly. I cannot emphasize enough the help that they have done, you know. They encouraged me more than anything to go to school. They interact with the school, I mean, you know? Like, my parents never went to, like, a choir concert or soccer game, or any of that. And if I need [name of housing program], the people will, to go, you know, I mean, they will. You know, that's the best part, you know, they're really like family. They really care. They really push me forward, you know, if I need anything. Hey, do you need anybody to help you get your driver's license? Do you need, you know ... they give you the resources, they give you everything that you need. They're really good people. They pushed me." -Kamal²

"I chose to go [to the alternative learning center (ALC)] because I got pregnant [while attending] my other school and I thought that it would help me with my education. And the other school didn't let me be there. I bring my baby to day-care every morning (it's at my school) and they take care of her. I get to take her out for lunch. And then I bring her back, and then they help me with my education."- Elizabeth¹

Attending college and high school at the same time works for me.

Comments from panelists at a breakout session titled “*Student Voice & Supports: The Transforming Power of Place*” highlighted the perspectives of young people at the Gateway to College alternative school in St. Paul. –Youth Panel³

“I feel connected and cared about, they truly care.”

“I live on my own, take care of it and work. [XX] fits into my schedule perfectly.”

“It is a lot different from high school when you are on a college campus. You are in this mindset. It teaches you to be independent and more.”

“I really like how I get breaks throughout my day, this really allows me to absorb what I have just learned, rather than going from class to class in a regular high school”

“I have a full time job on top of coming here, and at the start of this year, I was really worried because sometimes my school schedule interfered with my work schedule and I had to miss classes....so I met with Mr. X, and we set up a plan so that I can still be on track with my classes...It’s working really well!”

Education that accommodates non-traditional learning styles is important.

“The basic reason why I dropped out was because — a traditional high school setting like, I just couldn’t learn very much. I guess I learn really hands-on and if it’s shown to me in a really creative way then I get it right away. But, in traditional high school you sit down and read a book and hopefully you learn this. I just couldn’t do that.” –Sharif⁴

“Eventually, I found this [program], and I feel like this is a great school system. It’s not traditional but it’s a good place for...kids that can’t work well in the traditional schools and just belong here. That’s what we are all here for because we ain’t working well in traditional society or school.” –Beverly⁴

“[Transferring to the ALC] was the best decision I have ever made. Now I actually pass classes. People don’t realize that students have different types of learning and ‘alternative’ is a different way to learn and a great way to learn. At my old school I would fall behind because I didn’t understand the work or didn’t know how to do things. At times the teachers would go too fast and I would be totally lost. Now at the ALC if I don’t understand anything the teachers work with me and help me out by getting me caught up.”-Molly⁴

“It was tougher for me to go through mainstream high school. At [the ALC], I was very successful. I could work at my own pace. I didn’t feel pressure. I could take my time; do my work. I could ask teachers questions privately. It wasn’t like a hard core classroom setting. Instead of failing the normal high school, I was actually getting A’s and B’s. I graduated from college. ”- Nicole⁴

Findings from Research Utilizing Youth Voice

In 2009, the **Konopka Institute** conducted listening groups of middle and high school youth within 11 Minnesota counties, many of whom had experienced school dropout. Consistently, the students praised alternative learning centers as providing options for nontraditional students and programming that made allowances for students in situations that call for flexibility, including different school day hours⁵. This flexibility was particularly important for working parents or homeless students. In addition, students across settings favored choices that allow pursuit of a diploma or a GED. They also hope alternative education programs can 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. The negative stereotypes associated with alternative education often delay their entrance to these programs.

References

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