

GradMinnesota

Expanded Policy Recommendations



GradMinnesota's vision – **All young people in Minnesota graduate from high school prepared for success in postsecondary opportunities, work, civic engagement and life** – depicts a future built on collective responsibility to Minnesota children and youth. GradMinnesota's policy recommendations are aligned with current federal and state initiatives including "Striving for the World's Best Workforce" (WBWF) legislation passed in 2013. The policy recommendations listed below highlight key actions to ensure that all Minnesota students earn a high school diploma. In addition to active involvement from critical partners, the recommended policy changes require legislative will and funding, but the return on investment will yield substantial gains for the state in terms of increased revenue and societal well-being.

Recommendations

1. Ensure Quality Data is Available and Used to Effectively Target Supports for Students

Dropping out of high school is a process, not a one-day event. Research shows that early warning indicators of potential dropouts include school absences, behavior problems and failure in the core subjects of English and Math. Students can be identified as at risk of not completing high school as early as grade 6 using these indicators. Minnesota has an early response system, *The Minnesota Early Indicator and Response System (MEIRS)* that combines multiple data points and provides screening information to examine which students are on or off track for high school graduation and offers a framework on how to support them. Every school must have a team responsible for using this system, or another data system, to track indicators of disengagement on a regular basis and provide interventions to meet the unique needs and preferences of students, families and communities to ensure student success.

2. Make Sure A Tiered Framework of Interventions and Supports is Effectively Implemented

Providing supports using a layered framework – often referred to as a multi-tiered system of supports – is one way to help ensure that all students are receiving relevant interventions matched to their individual needs. Universal Supports (prevention for all) include rigor and high expectations for all students, evidence based effective core instruction, and safe school environments. Targeted Supports (for students showing early warning indicators) include mentoring programs, behavioral supports, afterschool programs, college readiness programs and service earning. Intensive Supports (for relatively few students) include wrap-around services, mental and chemical health counseling, and teen parent programs. While effective practices multi-tiered systems of support are already in use, school personnel often lack training and successful programs are not being implemented effectively throughout the state.

3. Increase Mentoring Throughout the State to Enhance Educational Success

Research shows that caring adults play a critical role in the lives of youth. We need more adults and/or peer mentors to take on a mentoring role with youth in order to increase the high school graduation rate in Minnesota. This recommendation calls for actively promoting the value of mentoring relationships through mass media, creating a work release policy allowing public sector employees to more easily volunteer in order to increase the number of mentors statewide, and providing training for everyone involved in mentoring relationships.

4. Design and Connect Services to Recover and Re-engage Youth

Across the state, we have a fractured system for finding dropouts, transferring credit and information between school districts, and ensuring services to address the educational and personal needs of those dropouts, or those on the verge of doing so. A functional and coordinated system must be developed to re-engage these students in school or alternative learning options to earn a diploma. Two issues are key: (1) for funding purposes, schools are required to drop a student from their enrollment rolls when s/he does not attend school for 15 consecutive days during the school year or 5 consecutive days of summer school unless the student has a legitimate exemption. After a student is dropped, the school is no longer responsible, and at this point the whereabouts of many students become unknown. Without follow-up, too many students are lost during the 15-day drop window; and, (2) students who move to another school or school district in the state often lose credit for their learning because of inconsistent credit tracking and varying graduation requirements among districts.

Policy is needed that requires contact with each student within the 15-day window to coordinate their return or to engage them in another pathway. This will require collaboration between school districts and community institutions so the status of every student remains known. Further, a statewide student data system, giving each student a “data backpack,” is critical to assure smoother transitions and accurate records of student progress.

5. Replace Exclusionary Discipline Policies and Practices with More Effective Alternatives

The Obama administration released a report in January 2014 calling for an end to zero-tolerance behavior policies which have been shown to: (1) increase long-term social and academic problems for students; (2) disproportionately affect boys, students in special education and students of color; and (3) often exclude students based on minor misconduct that does not mandate exclusionary responses. We recommend providing models and training for school leaders to revise exclusionary policies that (may unintentionally, but) actively push students out of school and instead provide alternatives that engage students and teach appropriate behavior.

6. Make Transportation Available to Ensure Access to Learning Opportunities Through Graduation

Equalizing access to programs and activities will increase student involvement and engagement, as well as address what now might be considered de facto discrimination. Currently, there are two key issues related to transportation: (1) students who take school buses do not have transportation for “out-of-school-time” which is often critical to address their educational needs and to engage them in programs (sports, music, art, etc.) which develop positive skills and self-esteem; and (2) students who attend alternative learning centers outside of their home district are not provided transportation. While expensive, providing access to public transportation would increase engagement of high school aged students in programs that are critical for their academic and social success.

7. Provide Effective Alternative Pathways and Additional Time to Earn a Diploma

Alternative forms of education are often effective at meeting the needs of students challenged by traditional school settings. We recommend expanding alternatives for students aged 17 to 21, such as earning credit towards a diploma for engaging in workforce opportunities, Adult Basic Education, GED honors option, etc. Currently, funding for a high school diploma is only available through 21 years of age. Consistent with policies in most developed countries, we recommend raising the age of how long we pay for students with significant education gaps to 23 years old.