

STUDY OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION OPTIONS

(THIRD YEAR)

STUDY PLAN

Study Mandate

Direct the Commission on Youth to continue to study alternative education program options and report findings and recommendations to the Commission on Youth prior to the 2009 General Assembly Session.

Identified Issues

- Alternative education programs provide many disciplined students an opportunity to continue their education. Alternative education programs may prevent a student from dropping out, becoming involved with the criminal justice system or receiving additional disciplinary actions.
- Not all students learn in the same educational structure. Alternative education schools and programs benefit students so they receive educational services and remain in the school environment.
- There is an increasing need for a continuum of student support services in schools to help students learn skills which may circumvent disciplinary referrals. These include anger management/violence prevention programs and positive behavior intervention.
- Research indicates that exclusionary discipline approaches potentially increase poor outcomes in students. Training school staff and educators in effective classroom management may increase the consistency of discipline, which can potentially reduce suspensions and expulsions.
- Unless the student qualifies for special education or is in the custody of the Department of Juvenile Justice, the student forfeits their right to an education when expelled. Parents must assure attendance unless they have access to a regional or local alternative education school or program. According to a survey conducted by the Virginia Commission on Youth for the 2005-2006 academic year, 57 of the responding school divisions reported occurrences where suspended/expelled students were not offered educational services.
- Regional and local programs frequently have waiting lists for students who need alternative education placements. Most alternative education programs, both regional and local, are not designed to handle significant numbers of students. Moreover, these programs cannot adequately serve the large number of students at risk for school failure who may benefit from these educational services.
- There is a link between disciplinary referrals and dropping out of school. Suspended or expelled students who do not receive educational services fall behind and become disengaged from school. This puts them at greater risk for dropping out.
- School divisions struggle with the challenges of keeping disengaged students on their rolls in order to provide them with instruction so they may receive diplomas. Unfortunately, these students may not ever return to the traditional school setting. These students may be "recovered" and opt to earn their GEDs in lieu of returning to school. However, these students cannot receive their GEDs unless they met distinct provisions set forth in the *Code of Virginia*. Many of these students do not qualify to test for the GED under these provisions and must wait until they are eighteen.

- The provision of educational services to disciplined youth impacts all child-serving agencies such as child-welfare, children's mental health and juvenile justice. Representatives from all child-serving agencies must collaborate to locate and fund appropriate services to at-risk and disciplined youth so as to reduce the possibility that the student will drop out of school.
- There is no consistent and established definition of an alternative program/school and what components must be present. There is great diversity among the local alternative education programs in program components, such as program hours and the ability to earn verified credits. The term "alternative education" covers all educational activities that fall outside the traditional K-12 school system, including vocational programs, special programs for gifted children and charter schools.

Study Activities

- Reconvene Advisory Group to assist in study effort and review proposed recommendations.
 - Invite representatives from agencies in the Health and Human Resources Secretariat.
- Continue to investigate school-based prevention programs and any funding opportunities.
- Investigate funding for a second tier of regional alternative education programs to serve students who are not succeeding in the regular school setting and who are at risk of dropping out.
- Investigate private educational and other alternative educational options for students who have not been attending school for a designated period of time and/or who are not succeeding in the public school setting.
- Investigate dual-enrollment as an option for providing transitional or educational services to students who are at risk for school failure or who are currently not attending school.
- Investigate waiving the compulsory education requirements for students who have fulfilled the pre-GED requirements, but are not otherwise eligible to test for the GED, including those provisions outlined in House Bill 355 (Cole) which was introduced during the 2008 General Assembly Session.
- Investigate the Individual Student Alternative Education Plan (ISAEP) guidelines to determine whether it could be expanded to serve high school students who have not been attending school for a designated period of time and/or who are not succeeding in the public school setting.
- Investigate the need and feasibility of establishing Special Middle Schools for over age middle school students.
- Develop recommendations.
 - Synthesize findings of statutory review and Advisory Group recommendations.
 - Solicit feedback to recommendations from constituents and Department of Education/Board of Education.
 - Present findings and recommendations to the Commission on Youth.
 - Prepare final report.