



Virginia  
Commission on Youth

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# Study of Alternative Education Options

Update: Year Three

September 9, 2008

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# Virginia Commission on Youth

## Presentation Outline

- Study Mandate
- Study Activities
- Preliminary Issues
- Findings from Study
- Future Activities



# Virginia Commission on Youth

## Study Mandate – Year 1

- The Commission on Youth (COY) approved the following recommendations at the May 2006 meeting:
  1. Direct COY to explore data available at the Department of Education (DOE) to determine whether a problem exists in Virginia regarding the number of school suspensions and expulsions within Virginia public schools and, if so, to make recommendations to address the study findings.
  2. Conduct a review of alternative education programs for suspended and expelled youth utilized in the Commonwealth.



## Study Mandate – Year 2

- COY approved the following recommendation at its April 2007 meeting:
  - COY will continue the study of alternative education program options and report findings prior to the 2008 General Assembly Session.
  - Issues to be studied included:
    1. review of survey data\* on local alternative education programs;
    2. school-based prevention programs and funding; and
    3. need for a second tier of regional alternative education programs.

\* In 2006, COY conducted a survey of all school divisions to learn more about existing alternative education programs.



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### Study Mandate – Year 3

- COY approved the following recommendation at its April 2008 meeting:
  - Request COY to continue the Advisory Group on Alternative Education Options and to invite representatives from all child-serving agencies. The Advisory Group will work to evaluate gaps in service in alternative education placements, as well as the reasons that students are not offered educational services.
  - A report on the findings from the Advisory Group will be made prior to the 2009 General Assembly Session.



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## Study Activities – Year 1

- *Reviewed expulsion and suspension data*
- *Reviewed state/federal requirements for school divisions' suspension and expulsion policies*
- *Reviewed alternative education approaches in Virginia*
- *Site visits of local and regional programs*
- *Survey of alternative education programs*
- *Convened Advisory Group*



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### Study Activities – Year 2

- *Completed analysis of COY/DOE survey*
- *Compiled survey results into a Guide*
- *Reviewed Virginia's school-based prevention programs and funding*
- *Assessed need for second tier of regional alternative education programs*



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## Study Activities – Year 3

- *Reconvened Advisory Group with representatives from Health and Human Resources*
- *Continued to investigate school-based prevention programs.*
- *Investigated alternative education options for students not succeeding in the public school system and at-risk of dropping out, including:*
  - *a second tier of regional alternative education programs;*
  - *private educational and other alternative educational options;*
  - *requirements for students who have fulfilled the pre-GED requirements, but are not otherwise eligible to test for the GED;*
  - *the Individual Student Alternative Education Plan (ISAEP) guidelines; and*
  - *special academies for over-age students.*



## Study Activities – Year 3 (cont.)

- *Synthesize findings*
- *Develop recommendations*
- *Solicit feedback*
- *Present recommendations to COY  
(Fall 2008)*
- *Prepare final report*



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## Study Activities – Years 1, 2 and 3

### ■ *Advisory Group\**

- Department of Education
- Virginia PTA
- Virginia Education Assn.
- Association of Elementary & Secondary School Principals
- Department of Criminal Justice Services
- Department of Juvenile Justice
- School Safety Specialists
- Virginia Alternative Education Association
- Virginia School Board Association
- Association of School Superintendents
- Association of Secondary School Principals
- Association of Middle School Principals
- School Resource Officers
- School Principals
- School Administrators
- Alternative Education Principals/Directors
- Commission on Youth Members
- Just Children

\* Virginia Dept. of Health, the Office of Comprehensive Services and the Dept. of Social Services added in Year 3.



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## Preliminary Issues

1. Review the number of school suspensions and expulsions in Virginia.
  - Prior research has confirmed that students who have been suspended from school are at a higher risk for other poor outcomes, including dropping out of school.
    - ❖ Three times more likely to drop out\*
    - ❖ Leading indicator of incarceration\*
2. Review alternative education options in the Commonwealth.
  - Alternative pathways to educational services help keep students connected to the mainstream educational system.
    - ❖ Regional alternative education programs
    - ❖ Local alternative education programs



## Additional Study Questions – Year 1

- What do alternative education options in the Commonwealth look like?
- How do these alternatives serve students in the Commonwealth, particularly students who have been suspended or expelled?
- What can be done to better provide educational services to students at-risk of school failure?
- What does Virginia have in place already?



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## Findings from Study

- Students who cannot be served in a traditional public school setting may not be offered any educational services.
- There is a shortage of school-based prevention programs.
- Utilizing effective disciplinary programs help to keep students in school.
- There is a lack of clarity about alternative education programs in Virginia.
- There is no central point of contact for alternative education programs.
- There is a lack of guidance/standards for locally-created alternative education schools/programs.
- Tracking students after they have attended an alternative program would be helpful.
- An individualized plan for students at-risk of school failure would help keep students in school.
- There is a need to proactively explore other educational options for students such as career and technical education.



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# Suspension and Expulsion in Virginia

- The *Code of Virginia* allows for the removal of students from a class for disruptive behavior and requires all school boards to:
  - establish criteria for removal of disruptive students;
  - follow steps in reporting incidents of disruptive behavior;
  - establish procedures for written notification to a student and the student's parents;
  - offer guidelines for alternative education assignments; and
  - establish procedures for the return of students to class and teacher participation in the decision.
  
- A school division's *Code of Conduct* is tailored to the diverse needs of the school division.



## Suspension and Expulsion in Virginia

- *Variation in School Division Disciplinary Policies*
  - Because school divisions tailor their *Codes of Conduct*, there is variation in policies among school divisions.
  - These differences affect how offenses are counted and reported, as well as the resulting disciplinary actions.
  - Suspension and expulsion rates cannot be accurately compared among school divisions.



## Suspension and Expulsion in Virginia

- *Statewide Reporting of Disciplinary Actions*
  - The *Code of Virginia* requires school divisions to submit data annually to DOE on incidents of discipline, crime and violence.
  - DOE offers comprehensive training to school divisions on reporting and submission of discipline, crime and violence.
  - User guides and training are both updated regularly to clarify any reporting issues.



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## Suspension and Expulsion in Virginia (cont.)

- *Utilization of Suspension and Expulsion in Virginia*
  - Schools are striving to provide appropriate discipline to students while balancing public safety concerns.
  - A significant percentage of students are suspended or expelled due to “one time” bad decisions without any previous history of bad behavior.
  - Poor choices account for many of the problem behaviors (drugs, alcohol, threats).
  - Lack of parental involvement may have a significant impact upon students’ behavioral problems.
  - There is a growing “at-risk” population of students.
  - There are occurrences where suspended/expelled students were not offered educational services.\*
  - Some students cannot be adequately served in a traditional school setting.

\*Survey of Alternative Education Options, Virginia Commission on Youth, 2006.



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### Alternative Education in Virginia

- School boards may permit or require students expelled for weapons or drug-related offenses to attend an alternative education program provided by the school board for the term of the expulsion.
- School board policies may also permit or require students suspended for more than 10 days to attend an alternative education program.
- Alternative education programs are authorized but not required to be established.



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## Alternative Education Approaches in Virginia (cont.)

### Regional Alternative Education Programs

- Virginia has 30 regional alternative education programs established to provide options for students who were suspended for violations of school board policy.
- These programs also accommodate students returning from juvenile correctional centers or those who are otherwise assigned by the school divisions.
  - 119 school divisions are served by these programs.
  - The General Assembly provides funding.
  - During the 2008-2010 Biennium, \$6,724,960 was appropriated in the first year and \$6,977,930 in the second year.

Source: *Virginia Board of Education Report on Regional Alternative Education Programs, 2008.*



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### Alternative Education Approaches in Virginia

(cont.)

- Students served by regional alternative education programs reported:
  - academic improvements;
  - decreased violence, firearms, and weapons possession incidences;
  - decreases in substance abuse and property offenses; and
  - good parental involvement.
- 70% of students remained in school:
  - 49% plan to return to their home schools; and
  - 21% will remain in the alternative education programs.
- Regional alternative education programs appear to be achieving their program purposes.

Source: *Virginia Board of Education Report on Regional Alternative Education Programs, 2007.*



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### Alternative Education Approaches in Virginia (cont.)

- Regional programs are required to report data to DOE.
- There has been a lack of information/data on locally created alternative education programs/practices.



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# Alternative Education Approaches in Virginia

(cont.)

- COY/DOE surveyed school divisions to request information on all available alternative education programs in Virginia.
  - Surveyed 132 school divisions
  - Requested information on:
    - structure of schools/programs;
    - funding source;
    - types of students served;
    - waiting lists;
    - gaps in service; and
    - students who were not offered any educational service.
  - Response rate of 95% (126/132 school divisions)



## Alternative Education Approaches in Virginia (cont.)

### ■ Recap on Survey

- ❖ 160 locally-administered programs/schools, with 46 located in Fairfax County.
- ❖ Local program design varies significantly.
- ❖ Students may have to wait to receive alternative education services; this is particularly true for divisions utilizing regional programs.
- ❖ Identified program challenges include inability to provide more instructional time, lack of facility space, transportation concerns and retaining qualified staff.
- ❖ Lack of family involvement/interest is the challenge most frequently identified.
- ❖ Some students not successful in a traditional school setting.
- ❖ 57 responding school divisions reported occurrences where disciplined students were not offered educational services.



## Alternative Education Approaches in Virginia (cont.)

- COY published the *Guide to Alternative Education Options for Suspended and Expelled Youth* which includes:
  - local alternative education programs; and
  - regional schools/programs & privately-funded programs are also included.
- DOE will continue to publish the *Guide* and re-survey divisions in 2008-2009, with the Virginia Alternative Education Association and the Virginia Association of Independent Education Specialized Education Facilities.



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# Findings from Study

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### Students Not Receiving Educational Services

- Unless the student qualifies for special education or is in the custody of the Department of Juvenile Justice, a student forfeits his right to an education when expelled.
- According to the survey, 57 of responding school divisions reported occurrences where suspended/expelled students were not offered educational services.
  - Of the 57, the total number of students not offered services was 6,268\*, with an average of 68 students per division.\*\*
  - In addition, regional and local programs have waiting lists for students who need an alternative education placement.

\* Virginia Commission on Youth Survey of Alternative Education Programs, 2007.

\*\*This may include some students suspended for 10 days or less.



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### Students Not Receiving Educational Services (cont.)

- Students who are suspended or expelled and do not receive educational services fall behind and become disengaged from school.
- Time out of school increases antisocial acts, school vandalism, tardiness, truancy and the dropout rate.
- There are gaps in alternative education services in Virginia, such as lack of placements for middle school students.
- Existing alternative education programs do not have the capacity to keep students permanently, even though students may be succeeding.
  - Over 50% reported their primary goal as transitioning students back to their regular academic setting.\*
  - In 2007-2008, 3,996 students were served by regional programs. The number of slots funded is 1,882.

\* Virginia Commission on Youth Survey of Alternative Education Programs, 2007.



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### Students Not Receiving Educational Services (cont.)

- In 2007-2008, there were 1,822 slots allotted among 30 regional alternative education programs.
- 26 of the 30 programs indicated that they would have placements for all slots assigned to each division in each regional program.
- 26 slots were transferred in four of the 30 regional alternative programs.
- Requested additional slots totaled 404.



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## Students not Receiving Educational Services

(cont.)

- Certain students have not found success in the traditional educational environment.
- No single program will address every need.
- Alternative education can serve as a proactive choice to students, rather than a “last chance” approach.
- Need for array of educational programs tailored to individual student needs.
  - Private programs – Project Recovery
  - Local initiatives – Roanoke Over-age Academy/Lancaster Phoenix Model
  - State approach – Regional Alternative Education programs, Career and technical education
- Advisory Group reviewing approaches
- Next meeting September 16, 2008



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### Shortage of School-based Prevention Programs

- There is a shortage of school-based prevention programs that address issues such as violence prevention, anger management, conflict resolution, and other behavioral health needs.
  - These programs reduce suspensions and expulsions.
- Existing programs have been negatively impacted by reductions to federal Safe and Drug-Free School grants.
  - In 2006, the level of funding decreased 21%
  - In 2007, there was an additional 11% reduction.
  - In 2008, there was a 15% reduction.



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### Shortage of School-based Prevention Programs

(cont.)

- Currently there are no state dollars to support prevention efforts in Virginia schools.
- In 2007 Fall Enrollment = 1,231,987 students
- Projected level of Virginia's allocation (Safe and Drug-Free School grants) = \$5,429,816.00
- Approximately \$4.41 per student



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### Shortage of School-based Prevention Programs (cont.)

- Virginia has an effective model already in place.
- **Student Assistance Programs (SAPs)** work with parents, school and community representatives to foster resiliency in students and interrupt behaviors that impede students' success.
- **SAPs** provide case management, substance abuse counseling, student assessment or pre-assessment, community liaison work and faculty consultation.
- The most common referrals are to community services boards, substance abuse counselors, psychologists, substance abuse treatment agencies, and the health department.
- Expected outcomes are improved attendance and grades, as well as promotion or graduation.



## Shortage of School-based Prevention Programs (cont.)

- 36 school divisions have **SAP** services and served 297,700 students or at least 20% of the total student population.
- While Virginia's **SAPs** have high satisfaction ratings, there is an inability to measure the effectiveness of existing **SAP** services.
  - A study of Pennsylvania's **SAPs** reveal improved school outcomes, improved attendance, decreased discipline problems, increases in grade promotion, and increases in graduation rates.



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### Shortage of School-based Prevention Programs (cont.)

- DOE is in the process of establishing guidelines for **SAPs** to promote uniformity and consistency.
- DOE is planning completion by June 2009.
- A statewide evaluation would allow for a more complete assessment of the efficacy of **SAPs**.



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# Effective Disciplinary Programs in Virginia's Schools

- Traditional disciplinary practices do not always affect desired outcomes.
- Evidence exists that imposing negative consequences for unacceptable behavior can increase antisocial acts, school vandalism, tardiness and truancy, and the dropout rate.
  - Suspension provides little more than a respite from the student's academic or behavior problems.
  - Student typically do not return to school with a more positive attitude or increased enthusiasm toward learning.
  - With each suspension, the probability increases that the student will fall further behind academically, which only serves to trigger more misbehavior to escape further classroom frustration or failure.



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# Effective Disciplinary Programs in Virginia's Schools

(cont.)

### *Effective School-wide Discipline* in Virginia schools

- There are 101 schools participating from first two cohorts – 29 school divisions:
  - 2 primary
  - 50 elementary
  - 3 elementary/middle
  - 35 middle
  - 10 high
  - 1 alternative education
- 53 schools in cohort group one reported a decrease in discipline referrals to the principal's office from 913 in 2007 to 562 in 2008.
- Graham Park Middle School in Prince William County had a reduction of nearly 500 discipline referrals (about 20%) from the previous year.

Source: Virginia Department of Education, 2008.



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# Effective Disciplinary Programs in Virginia's Schools

(cont.)

- Results of implementing *effective schoolwide discipline* in Virginia:
  - one middle/high school reduced the number of discipline referrals by two-thirds;
  - another middle school saved the equivalent of 20 eight-hour days;
  - teachers gained 430 more hours of instruction time;
  - statewide achievement scores increased over a four-year period; and
  - the number of elementary school students who met state achievement standards in reading increased from 20% to 79% over a four-year period.\*



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### Effective Disciplinary Programs in Virginia's Schools (cont.)

- DOE has held awareness sessions and distributed information to divisions about this program (Supts. Memo #107, April 25, 2008).
- DOE works with schools to implement this program on a voluntary basis.
- Participation has grown from 66 schools in 29 divisions in 2006 to 102 in 33 divisions as of July 2008.
- A third cohort will join this fall.
- Other evidence-based disciplinary programs in Virginia are being successfully implemented.



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### Lack of Clarity about Alternative Education

- Currently 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
  - programs for the handicapped.\*
- There is no consistent and established definition of what an alternative program/school is and what components must be present.
- The idea of a unifying definition for alternative education would be helpful for both funding opportunities and evaluation purposes.
- A definition of alternative education programs that describes the full array of alternatives may be an important element in encouraging the development of the most effective programs.

\* 8VAC20-330-10



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## Lack of Clarity about Alternative Education (cont.)

- The Virginia Alternative Education Association has researched alternative education definitions.
- The following language is their recommendation:
  - *Alternative Education is any non-traditional educational program and/or service that meets the academic, social, and emotional needs of students.*
  - *They may include but are not limited to:*
    - ❖ *ISAEP (Individual Student Alternative Education Plan program for 16 & 17 year olds)*
    - ❖ *GED*
    - ❖ *Detention*
    - ❖ *Pregnant and parenting*
    - ❖ *Academic Enhancement*
    - ❖ *Behavior Intervention*
    - ❖ *Substance abuse*
    - ❖ *Career Development/internship/apprenticeship*
    - ❖ *Transition to and from other schools/programs*
    - ❖ *Formal or informal education or training that occurs inside or outside the traditional school setting*



## No Central Point of Contact for Alternative Education

- In Virginia, there is no central point of contact for information about alternative education programs.
- Local school divisions' alternative education programs are very diverse and not monitored by DOE.



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### Finding No Central Point of Contact for Alternative Education (cont.)

- Alternative education programs are on the continuum of educational services/dropout prevention.
- Improving coordination of alternative education programs allows for improved utilization and transition.
- Include programs related to dropout prevention, at-risk youth, prevention and discipline management.
- Advisory Group will address at upcoming meeting.



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### The Lack Of Guidance/Standards for Local Alternative Education Schools/Programs

- Local alternative education programs are very diverse.
  - 20% of local alternative education programs do not allow for students to earn verified credits.
  - The average cost per pupil was reported to be \$4,850.75.
  - Per pupil program cost ranged from \$100 to \$22,702.
  - Median cost was \$6,000.
  - Half of all local programs were entirely locally funded.
  - 25% of local alternative education programs operate less than 20 hours per week.



## Virginia Commission on Youth

### The Lack Of Guidance/Standards for Local Alternative Education Schools/Programs (cont.)

- Model guidelines may be helpful to offer consistency in programs.
- Local alternative programs are key components of dropout prevention programming.
- Guidelines for:
  - Instruction
  - Teacher/student ratio
  - Assessment
  - Parent/Community Involvement
- Advisory Group discuss at upcoming meeting.



## Individualized Plans for Students At-Risk of School Failure

- Grades 8, 9 and 10 are the grades where the most students are lost and at-risk for dropping out.
- A plan similar to an Individualized Education Program (IEP) could be used to help students at-risk of school failure/disciplinary problems.



## Individualized Plans for Students At-Risk of School Failure (cont.)

- DOE's Proposed Revisions to the Standards of Accreditation include provisions for a personal Academic and Career Plan.
- The Board of Education will hold five public hearings on October 30, 2008 to receive public comment regarding the proposed revisions.



## Individualized Plans for Students At-Risk of School Failure (cont.)

### ■ *Proposed Academic and Career Plans*

- *All middle schools must develop and maintain a personal Academic and Career Plan, as established by the Board of Education, for each seventh and eighth grade student.*
- *The plan shall include the student's educational goals and program of study for high school graduation and a post-secondary career pathway based on the student's academic and career interests.*
- *The plan must be developed and signed by the student, the student's parent or guardian, and officials designated by the principal.*
- *The plan must be reviewed and updated, if necessary, before the student enters the ninth and eleventh grades.*



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### Tracking Students After they Attend Alternative Education

- Frequently it is unknown what happens to students in alternative education
  - Successful transition to home school
  - Remain in alternative program/school
  - Drop out
  - Leave but return
  - Acquire GED
- DOE student identifiers could be used to compare alternative education placements to students that had dropped out.
- This could help localities identify at-risk students and determine if they were coming back to re-enroll into school.
- Gauge success of alternative education programs.



## Career and Technical Education Options

(cont.)

- Nontraditional educational options can help students remain in and be successful in high school.
  - High-risk students are eight to 10 times less likely to drop out in the 11th and 12th grades if they enroll in a career and technical program instead of a general program.
  - A quality career and technical program can reduce a school's dropout rate by as much as 6%.
  - Career and technical are less likely than general-track students to fail a course or to be absent.



## Career and Technical Education Options (cont.)

- Returning to school is difficult for at-risk and disconnected students.
- Typically, these students have been unsuccessful in their original high school environment.
- Educational options that respond to students' diverse needs and circumstances can increase graduation rates by keeping students connected to school.

Source: Association for Career and Technical Education, 2007.



## Career and Technical Education Options

- Virginia received a \$500,000 grant from the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) to improve science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education in their states.
- Virginia's goal is to enhance Career and Technology (CTE) centers at the high school and postsecondary level in order to reinforce and increase Virginia's workforce.
- Need for continued enhancement as Virginia's statewide educational pipeline for skilled trades appears inadequate to meet future needs.



# Virginia Commission on Youth

## Upcoming Activities

- Site visit to Stafford County Public Schools in September – tour both regional and local alternative programs.
- Advisory Group Meeting – September 16, 2008 at 1:00 p.m.
  - Review findings and formulate legislation, budget language or any other policy recommendations.
  - Solicit feedback/public comment.
  - Present final recommendations to COY
- Prepare Final Report.