



Virginia Commission on Youth

STUDY OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION OPTIONS ADVISORY GROUP MEETING

June 30, 2008

10:00 a.m.

5th Floor East Conference Room
General Assembly Building

Members Present

The Honorable William H. Fralin, Jr., Virginia House of Delegates (electronically)
The Honorable Chris Peace, Virginia House of Delegates
Cynthia Cave, Department of Education
Anne Wescott, Department of Education
Michelle Vucchi, Department of Education
Laurel Marks, Department of Criminal Justice Services
Willie Carrington, Newport News Public Schools
Sarah Geddes, Just Children
Jan McKee, Virginia Alternative Education Association
Asia Jones for Dr. Rita Bishop, Roanoke City Schools
Pamela Fisher, Office of Comprehensive Services
Anne Rollins, Virginia Department of Health

Commission on Youth Staff Members

Amy Atkinson, Leah Hamaker, Cordell Hairston

Agenda Items

I. Welcome and Introductions

Amy Atkinson began by welcoming the Advisory Group and sharing with the members that this would be the third and final year of study. Ms. Atkinson encouraged the group to develop legislative proposals on budget recommendations to be presented to the Commission for their consideration for the 2009 General Assembly.

II. 2006 and 2007 Study Recommendations

Ms. Hamaker briefed the Advisory Group on the status of the study recommendations made in previous years of the study.

Ms. Hamaker informed the group that the following recommendations were carried out during 2006-2007.

- The Commission conducted a survey of school divisions to receive a complete picture of locally created alternative education programs and ascertain whether there are unmet service needs. The results of the survey were shared with the Commission.
- The Commission compiled a guide for alternative education programs/practices.

- The Commission investigated ways to increase funding for a second tier of regional alternative education programs.
- The Commission, in conjunction with various child-serving agencies, investigated ways to fund prevention programs to supplant funding lost in recent years from the decreases in the federal Safe and Drug-Free School grants.
- The Commission continued to study alternative education program options and reported findings to the Commission on Youth prior to the 2008 General Assembly Session.

Ms. Hamaker informed the group that the following recommendations were carried out during 2007.

- The Guide on *Local Alternative Education Options for Suspended and Expelled Youth* was completed and the affected organizations that offered assistance with its dissemination had been contacted by letter. The Guide was also sent to all 132 school division superintendents.
- The Commission requested, by letter, that affected agencies that deliver services to children also placed a hyperlink to this report on their website.
- The Department was also asked to continue with the collection of data on local alternative education programs biennially.
- A letter was sent to the Department asking that the Department establish guidelines for statewide implementation of Student Assistance Programs (SAPs).
- A budget amendment was submitted to the 2008 General Assembly requesting funds for data collection on SAPs in the amount of \$150,000 in FY09 and \$100,000 in FY10 but was not adopted.
- A letter was also sent to the Department asking that information on effective school wide discipline programs, as well as other evidence-based school-based programs be shared with all school divisions.
- The Virginia Alternative Education Association was asked to research alternative education definitions established by the National Education Association and share any suggested language the Department of Education and the Commission prior to the 2009 Session of the General Assembly.
- The Commission continued the Advisory Group on Alternative Education Options and added representatives from health and human resource agencies. A report on the findings from the Advisory Group will be made to the Commission prior to the 2009 General Assembly Session.

III. 2008 Study Work Plan/Discussion

The Advisory Group discussed how this was the final year for offering findings and recommendations for this study. Clear and concise recommendations should be offered to the Commission so they could act on the recommendations. The Advisory Group agreed that more work would need to be done to ascertain if there was a need for additional regional schools/slots. While the survey revealed there were gaps in services, the Advisory Group should make the final determinations over the course of the next several meetings. The Advisory Group could help the Commission develop strong recommendations.

Delegate Fralin suggested that the Advisory Group work with the end goal being the development of legislation/budget language for the 2009 General Assembly Session. He asked if definition of alternative education need to be changed or if there were enough slots to serve students that were not succeeding in their home schools. It was noted that there are three issues the Advisory Group should bear in mind while offering recommendations:

1. What is offered to students expelled from school/do we offer them any alternatives?
2. Is there a need for additional regional alternative education programs?
3. The graduation rate information to be released in the fall of 2008 will be higher than previously reported because of improved data collection from DOE. Recovering potential dropouts in alternative schools would be an effective strategy.

Various programs were discussed. Dr. Carrington noted that Newport News was opening two recovery centers geared towards Individual Student Alternative Education Plan (ISAEP) and credit recovery. Val Gooss stated that Henrico had two alternative schools, one middle school that served Henrico County students. It was noted that there was great discrepancy among alternative education programs and that there were no standards for them currently.

Jan McKee shared with the group the following definition of alternative education adopted by her association. "Alternative education" is any non-traditional educational program and/or service that meets the academic, social and emotional needs of students. These may include, but are not limited to:

- ISAEP (Individual Student Alternative Education Plan-Program for 16- & 17-year olds)
- GED (General Educational Development)
- Detention Centers
- Pregnant & Parenting Programs
- Academic Enhancement
- Behavior Interventions
- Substance Abuse
- Career Development/internships/Apprenticeships
- Transition to and from other schools/programs
- Formal and/or information training inside and/or outside the tradition school setting

The Advisory Group discussed other issues relating to the study plan and the recommendations offered in previous years.

- It is very important to be able to intervene early and if possible, it is important to get students into programs before a serious disciplinary event occurs.
- Grades 8, 9 and 10 are the grades where the most students are lost and at-risk for dropping out.
- Alternative schools are frequently a last resort for students.
- Frequently, students do so well they do not want to leave the alternative school/program.
- In certain programs, students can stay in alternative programs or go back to their home school.
- Some students need a smaller environment in order to succeed.
- Transition programs are crucial in order to successfully transition a student back to his or her home school.
- There is a need for preventive programs and options (mental health) in the school setting.
- In alternative education programs, there is a need for well-trained staff who look at instruction in a different way.
- Alternative schools are very diverse and there are some that do not have standards. Accreditation, training, and transitions can vary significantly between schools.
- Alternative schools should not warehouse students but help at-risk students learn more effectively.
- Students in alterative placements may have mental health issues; however, it was noted that this was not always true and that frequently, the family also had issues. It was too complex to state that all students in alternative programs had mental health issues. Other health issues, emotional issues, and poverty could also play a role.
- Alternative schools/programs should employ strengths-based approaches and not be deficit-based.
- It may be preferable for students to stay in their home schools and most do transition back. However, students frequently were successful in alternative programs and should be allowed to remain in that environment if they were catching up on credits and succeeding

Questions were raised about funding. While funding for alternative schools varies, many schools receive funding formulas. Several alternative schools had over a 90 percent pass rate on their students' SOLs.

The Advisory Group discussed items that would help at-risk students succeed in school. The following ideas were discussed:

1. Standards for alternative education schools/programs;
2. The need for a plan for all at-risk students;
3. Teacher training;
4. Incentives for teachers for alternative education such as an hour of planning time every day; and
5. Individualized plans for at-risk students.

IV. Roanoke City's Overage Academy

Asia R. Jones, Director of Student Support Services, gave an overview of Roanoke's Overage Academy, Forest Park.

Ms. Jones stated that the school would serve middle and high school students who are older than their grade level or who have dropped out of school. Dropout prevention and retrieval would be available. Dual enrollment with the community college was also an option. A future planning center would also be part of the academy. Dominion Day Services would be housed in the school and provide counseling and character development programs that would be incorporated into the academic program. Mentors assigned to work with students to provide support, career guidance, and workforce assistance. It was a mosaic approach.

The middle school would serve 80 students and the high school would serve 170 students. Teacher to student ratio would be 1 to 10 and not go any higher than 1 to 12 if the population were to grow. Parent permission is required for all students under 18 and the review team evaluates all applicants to determine the "fit" for the program. For high school, priority would be given to currently enrolled students. Students would be prepared for college or the workplace.

The Advisory Group then asked Ms. Jones questions about the program. Ms. Jones noted that Forest Park was based on the Phoenix Academy in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. *The pupil ratio funding was the same as for other Roanoke City schools but the school board allotted just over 1 million dollars to facilitate the program development and transition of the elementary students that will be transitioned to other identified elementary schools. Roanoke City Public Schools also submitted a proposal to receive a competitive grant from the AT&T High School Success Special Grants Program. The school division has not yet been notified regarding the status of the grant award.* It was also noted that disciplined students would not be sent to Forest Park and that would not be an appropriate placement. Those students would be served at Noel C. Taylor Academy in Roanoke.

V. Proposed Legislation/Budget Actions

The Advisory Group noted recurring issues from the meeting. One question that was raised was whether schools were appropriately releasing students who were not attending school so that they could pursue other alternatives. Questions were raised about where the funding went if a child was not released. It was noted that 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. Moreover, it could help track students as they transition from 8th and 9th grade and whether the alternative schools were effectively serving these students.

The Group discussed whether a plan similar to an IEP could be used to help students at-risk of school failure/disciplinary problems. DOE representatives stated the Board of Education had recommended that all students have an individual student plan. While this is in draft phase, it was adopted by the Board. It would commence in Middle School and continue through High School.

The Advisory Group discussed whether all school divisions should have access to a regional program to serve at-risk students. This could be discussed at further meetings.

The Advisory Group agreed that the following items should be investigated further:

- Standards for alternative schools/programs;
- Teacher training and incentives;
- School-based programs and ISAEP; and
- Mandatory Individual student plan for at-risk students.

VI. Discussion and Comments

Ms. Hamaker informed the Advisory Group that there would be two additional meetings over the summer and possibly an additional meeting in the fall. Outsider presenters would be invited to assist the Advisory Group in the development of recommendations. The meeting adjourned at 12:10 p.m.