



Study of Alternative Education Options

Year Three

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Leah D. Hamaker



Study Mandate – Year 3

- The Commission on Youth (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.



Study Activities – Year 3

- Reconvened Advisory Group with representatives from Health and Human Resources.
- Investigated 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

- Site visit to Stafford County Public Schools in September – toured regional and local alternative education programs
- Interviews with Virginia Department of Education staff
- Three Advisory Group Meetings
 - Received presentations on identified issues
 - Reviewed findings and formulated legislation, budget language or other policy recommendations
 - Solicited feedback/public comment
- Prepare Final Report.



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Study Findings



Students Not Receiving Educational Services

- There are gaps in alternative education services in Virginia, such as lack of placements for middle school students and credit recovery for overage middle and high school students.
- Existing alternative education programs do not have the capacity to keep students permanently, even if students are succeeding.*
 - In 2007-2008, 3,996 students were served by regional programs. The number of slots funded is 1,882.
 - 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.
 - The requested number of additional slots totaled 413.
- Over 50% of alternative education programs reported their primary goal as transitioning students back to their regular academic setting.**
- Students frequently have to wait to receive alternative education services; this is particularly true for divisions utilizing regional programs.**

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

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



Effective Disciplinary Programs in Virginia

- 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 students' academic or behavior problems.
- With each suspension, the probability increases that a student will fall farther behind academically, which may trigger additional misbehavior.
- Training school staff and educators in effective classroom management may increase the consistency of discipline, which can potentially reduce suspensions and expulsions.
- A schoolwide system of effective disciplinary practices contributes to improved academic performance and social behavior.



Lack of Clarity about Alternative Education

- There is no consistent and established definition of what an alternative program/school is 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 programs for the handicapped.
- A broad definition of alternative education programs is important for program development and evaluation.



No Central Point of Contact for Alternative Education

- In Virginia, there is no central point of contact or office for information about alternative education programs.
- Improving coordination of alternative education programs would allow for improved utilization and transition of students from alternative to traditional educational settings.
- Such a contact could monitor and advise on policies and procedures which impact alternative education programs, conduct training on alternative education for school divisions, review and assist with data collection on alternative education, and develop start-up processes for new alternative education programs.



Lack of Guidelines for Local Alternative Education Programs

- In Virginia, there are approximately 160 local alternative education programs and all are diverse.
- Students enrolled in alternative education programs may require stronger program components to help them catch up and to be successful. It is important that these students also have the opportunity to earn a diploma, meet high academic standards and prepare for postsecondary options.
- Twenty percent of local alternative education programs do not allow students to earn verified credits. Per pupil program cost ranged from \$100 to \$22,702, with median cost being \$6,000. Half of all local programs were entirely locally funded. Twenty-five percent of local alternative education programs operate fewer than 20 hours per week.*

* Virginia Commission on Youth Survey of Alternative Education Programs, 2008.



Tracking Students After Placement in Alternative Education

- It is frequently unknown what happens to students after they are referred to alternative education.
- Students could:
 - successfully transition to their home school,
 - remain in the alternative program/school,
 - drop out, or
 - leave the program but later return or acquire a GED.
- Tracking students placed in alternative education could help determine whether they were returning to and re-enrolling in their home school.
- Tracking would also help show which alternative education programs were successfully transitioning students to their home schools or helping them to secure a diploma or a GED.



Career and Technical Education

- The Board of Education recognized the connection between students' connectedness to school and school safety in its Comprehensive Plan.
- Educational options that respond to students' diverse needs and circumstances can keep students connected to school.
- Alternatives, such as career and technical educational options, can help students remain in and be successful in high school.



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Recommendations



Recommendation 1 – Students Not Receiving Educational Services

- **Option 1:** Introduce legislation to amend § 22.1-209.1:2 of the *Code of Virginia* to provide that regional alternative education options may also be utilized for students at-risk of a long-term suspension as authorized by the school superintendent. Due process protections regarding notice, hearings, and appeals required for students who are suspended or expelled are required when a regional alternative education placement is recommended for students deemed at-risk of receiving a long-term suspension. Also, clarify that Section of the Code refers to “regional” programs.
- **Option 2:** Introduce a budget amendment to allow school divisions not currently participating in a regional alternative education program or participating, but not allotted slots, to join an existing regional alternative education program and be allocated state slots. There are approximately 16 affected school divisions: Albemarle, Arlington, Buchanan, Chesterfield, Frederick, Surry, Warren, Charlottesville, Covington, Falls Church, Portsmouth, Loudoun, Page, Rockingham, Winchester, and Colonial Beach.
- **Option 3:** Introduce a budget amendment for 413 additional slots in the regional alternative education programs. These slots could be utilized for students who are not succeeding in the public school setting, as well as address the existing shortage of slots. (The fiscal impact is \$1,581,790 - \$3,707 per slot x 413.)



Recommendation 2 – Effective Disciplinary Programs in Virginia

- **Option 1:** Request that the Chairman of the Virginia Commission on Youth write a letter to the Board of Education to ask that the revisions to the Standards of Accreditation (SOA) be amended to include provisions for requiring schools exhibiting suspension and expulsion rates above the state average implement evidence-based intervention programs designed to improve suspension and expulsion rates.



Recommendation 3 – Lack of Clarity Regarding Alternative Education

- **Option 1:** Introduce legislation to include a definition of alternative education programs in the *Code of Virginia* which is consistent with § 22.1-253.13:1. that describes instructional programs supporting the Standards of Learning (SOLs) and other educational objectives. This legislation would specify that alterative education options are for students whose needs are not met in programs prescribed elsewhere, as set forth in the SOLs. “Alternative education” will be replaced by “nontraditional education” except when referring to regional alternative education programs.



Recommendation 4 – No Central Point of Contact for Alternative Education

- **Option 1:** Request that the Chairman of the Virginia Commission on Youth write a letter requesting the Superintendent of Public Education establish a central point of contact within the Virginia Department of Education in the area of nontraditional education options.



Recommendation 5 – Lack of Guidelines for Local Alternative Education Schools/Programs

- **Option 1:** Request that the Chairman of the Virginia Commission on Youth write a letter requesting the Virginia Board of Education establish model guidelines for locally-created alternative education programs consistent with the guidelines established for the regional alternative education programs.



Recommendation 6 – Tracking Students After Placement in Alternative Education

- **Option 1:** Request that the Chairman of the Virginia Commission on Youth write a letter requesting that the Virginia Department of Education establish a mechanism for school divisions to use the individual student tracking number system to indicate whether a student is enrolled in their home school, in a local alternative setting or in a regional alternative school.



Recommendation 7 – Career and Technical Education

- **Option 1:** Request the Virginia Commission on Youth to evaluate policies and goals for career and technical education services, career and technical education needs and gaps in services that address identified needs of career and technical education programs in the Commonwealth.