

One Size Does Not Fit All

The Case for Alternative Pathways to High School Graduation

Background

Many of the 6,000 Maryland students that officially drop out of school each year are under the age of sixteen.¹ However in the 2016-17 school year, this statistic will change as the state compulsory school age—the age in which children must legally attend school—increases from 16 to 18 years old.

While increasing the compulsory school age is a step toward addressing the student dropout rate, Maryland needs a concerted effort in all of the school districts to keep youth from opting out of school. Advocates for Children and Youth released a set of dropout prevention policy strategies in 2014 entitled *Graduate Maryland*. This initiative solicited feedback from parents, students, and key stakeholders around the state regarding the barriers to graduation that many youth encounter and suggested solutions for eliminating those barriers.

One key issue was alternative education and programming. The case for providing alternative pathways to graduation is necessary as not all students will excel in traditional learning environments. This circumstance is especially true for high school-aged youth who often have family responsibilities and financial challenges that make the traditional school environment next to impossible.

This white paper will define the meaning of an alternative program, provide an overview of alternative options and enhancements as well as share examples of promising and successful practices in Maryland and around the country.

Advocates for Children and Youth hopes this white paper will serve as a resource for schools,

districts and stakeholders as they attempt to build or renew alternative program efforts in light of the new compulsory school age law.

What Is An Alternative Program?

An alternative program is a state-recognized educational option which allows students to complete course work to meet high school graduation requirements outside of the normal high school environment and/or process.

Successful Program Elements

In 2013, Advocates for Children and Youth worked with the firm Child and Family Policy Associates to conduct a state and nationwide scan of alternative programs. As a part of this research, we looked for programs with positive outcomes for youth. These positive outcomes included increased graduation rates among students, higher state mandated testing scores, and increased rates of attendance. The most successful programs had the following characteristics:

- Private and public funding
- Job and career development focus
- Non-traditional school hours
- Personalized academic instruction and/or some level of self-pacing
- Strong community partnerships with nonprofits and providers
- Use of technology
- Strong social supports and a focus on addressing individual barriers

It is important to develop an alternative plan that is flexible to accommodate the varying needs of students. Below are some components to consider when developing an alternative program:

¹ Maryland Report Card. (2013). www.mdreportcard.org.

- A focus on students 18 years or older who are significantly deficient in credits
- A focus on behavioral issues and social-emotional development
- An option of GED prep courses
- The ability to earn a diploma from the student's home school while attending an alternative program
- The option to earn credit through community-based learning opportunities

Alternative School Improvement

Most school districts have “alternative schools” that commonly house students who are experiencing academic or behavioral challenges.² Oftentimes, these types of alternative programs do not provide a model much different than a typical student's school of origin. While the alternatives may provide more social support and academic tutoring options, the curriculum, instruction, and scheduling often parallel that of the traditional academic environment. The only difference is that the student is removed from a familiar setting that was the center of their social environment.

In spite of this, alternative schools offer some of the easiest solutions to creating new pathways for students not excelling in the traditional environment. These schools are fertile ground to try innovative ideas that adapt to the students' needs.

Baltimore City Public Schools – Push-In Schools

Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS) is trying two new models of alternative education. In 2012-13, BCPS examined the effectiveness of their Alternative Options Program (AOP) and found room for significant improvement. The study found that it was challenging for students to access an AOP due to complicated entrance criteria, age requirements, special issues related to a student's disability, etc. Additionally, AOPs were virtually inaccessible because of their

location. Many students had to either take several public buses to get to school or not show up due to distance and time it took to get there. One interesting takeaway from the research was that many students wanted to stay connected to the social aspects of their school of origin such as their friends, sports, and dances.

Recognizing these challenges as opportunities, BCPS revamped their goals for the AOP program by eliminating the barriers by making AOPs geographically accessible, socially connected, and flexible in scheduling and programming. In order to achieve these goals, BCPS developed a ‘push-in model’ that creates an alternative school on the same site as a traditional (or home) school. The ‘push-in model’ allow students to be fast-tracked through the alternative program. This approach is more cost-effective in regards to the setting and staffing, and allows students to stay socially-connected to their peers.

Currently, two schools are implementing this approach—Frederick Douglass High School and Mergenthaler Vocational-Technical High School (MerVo). The model allows students from other schools to transfer to either of these schools if space is available. This model is in the first year of implementation therefore, academic and behavioral outcomes are awaiting analysis. Although formal outcome data are not yet available, there is high demand for placement and anecdotal accounts of positive outcomes that suggest the program is a success.

Baltimore City Public Schools – Transitional Sites

BCPS operates three sites for long-term suspended and expelled students: an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school. As BCPS changed and improved discipline policies over the past seven years, the utilization of these transitional sites has decreased.

When assessing how to address the under-utilization of these facilities, BCPS decided to broaden the scope of these three schools to also

² Alternative Schooling. (2014). National Dropout Prevention Center. <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/effective-strategies/alternative-schooling>.

focus on trauma. Many children across the 84,000 student system experience various types of trauma which include violence, fire, or a stay at a juvenile detention facility. These children would benefit from the kind of support that could be provided in a short-term alternative school environment that includes social supports such as mental and behavioral health services, academic supports, and a transition plan back to the school of origin.

The new concept for transitional sites accommodates students who need a transitional school to help them overcome whatever barriers to academic and behavioral success they may be facing. The school provides a flexible environment in terms of length-of-stay for all students, allowing both long and short-term enrollments. The 2013-14 school year was the first year of the model and many adjustments are still being made to ensure maximum effectiveness for students. Specialized instruction for students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is also being perfected as many of those students must take certain classes at their school of origin.

These models are innovative and address the heart of student educational and behavioral needs.

Lesson Learned: If school districts evaluate their programs from the student's perspective, administrators can positively reshape existing alternative programs to make them more efficient and students more successful.

Alternative Credit Pathways

Although the traditional classroom may work well for some, it is not effective for all students. In order to help students graduate and be prepared for post-secondary education and/or career opportunities, we must provide opportunities for students to earn credit for learning experiences that occur beyond the traditional classroom environment.

There are multiple ways to provide meaningful educational opportunities in a community-based setting that not only allow students to

meet the requirements of high school graduation but also lead students to meaningful post-secondary education, training and/or employment.³ States across the nation, including Maryland, are reconfiguring and expanding pathways for high school students to earn credit. By utilizing community resources such as community organizations, businesses, and universities, school districts provide students with opportunities to build skills and demonstrate core competency mastery outside of the classroom⁴.

Maryland

Worcester County has a Work Based Learning for Credit (WBL) program where students are able to gain credits toward graduation through school appointed internships and work opportunities. High school students who are enrolled in either the technical or traditional high schools are able to participate in the WBL program. After completing the prerequisite courses, students are offered an opportunity to apply for a paid or unpaid internship aligned with their technical coursework for credit. This experience requires that students work a minimum of 15 hours per week and allows them to earn up to 6 credits toward graduation.⁵ For students to receive credit, supervisors are asked to submit evaluations to the school, and those who successfully execute work duties are granted course credit. Worcester County's Work Based Learning for Credit program has been successful in not only keeping students connected to the school while providing invaluable work experience, but also in creating a channel that provides post-secondary work opportunities for students.

³ Rhode Island Urban Education Task Force. (2009). Multiple Pathways for Student Success. Final Report of the Rhode Island Urban Education Task Force, 23-30. Retrieved from http://annenberginstitute.org/UETF/pdf/UETF_Final_Report.pdf

⁴ Morgan, E., Olsson, E. & Traill, S. (2012). Learn Anytime, Anywhere: Rethinking How Students Earn Credit Beyond School Hours. Retrieved from <http://www.expandinglearning.org/sites/default/files/Learn%20Anytime.%20Anywhere-%20Rethinking%20How%20Students%20Earn%20Credit%20Beyond%20School%20Hours.pdf>

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http://www.worcesterk12.com/sites/default/files/CCAT_Clean.pdf

Rhode Island

Rhode Island has implemented a graduation system that supports multiple pathways toward a high school diploma. In 2003, the Board of Regents, which governs education in the state, passed regulations that require “graduation by proficiency,” meaning students must demonstrate academic mastery by fully completing a cadre of assessments, rather than a certain number of course hours.⁶ This, along with a 2011 policy change, which requires districts to develop and implement a comprehensive system for middle and high school students that includes multiple learning opportunities as well as several measures for determining graduation readiness, has broadened opportunities for students to earn credit. Strong collaboration among schools and community partners has proved vital for the success of this model.

Through this model, students are able to apply what they have learned in the classroom and engage in project-based learning that allows them to earn credit for work they complete with local partners. For example, students from Woonsocket High School were able to curate an exhibit for the local museum that compared the immigrant experiences from the late-19th century with the immigrant experiences of today. This project not only allowed them to directly apply their knowledge and utilize analytical skills, but also to meet the state American History standards, earning the students American History course credit.⁷

Skill-Based Models

Whether out of the necessity or desire to earn income, a sizable number of dropouts indicate that the main reason they want to leave school early is that they are not gaining skills that can be easily transferred to future desired employment opportunities or even current employment opportunities.⁸ Traditional schools

focus on the foundations of learning and subject matter, yet some careers do not require a broad knowledge base but instead a narrow, technical skill base. Another model that districts and charter-based schools are using is skill-based education. Skill-based education centers on connecting students to the technical skills that they desire while infusing basic education within the technical learning.

The skill-based model is not new; apprenticeship-like learning has existed in the past. The main difference is that other core subjects are connected to the skill-based learning. There are two California-originating models that are showing positive results using the skill-based format and were created through partnerships with outside entities with a focus on workforce development.

SIA Tech

The School for Integrated Academics and Technologies (SIA Tech) is a network of fourteen public charter high schools with campuses in five states.⁹ This model focuses on the re-engagement of students that have or are about to drop out of school. Many of their incoming students fall into the over-age and under-credit category. Using an innovative and personalized curriculum, SIA Tech integrates technology with academics, providing an opportunity to develop job-ready skills. SIA Tech is a personalized and skill-based approach to learning that includes flexibility in learning styles and class schedules that many students desire and need. Unlike some job skill-focused programs that only provide certification, SIA Tech offers the opportunity to earn a high school diploma. SIA Tech tracks student outcomes using multiple measures include state assessment scores. SIA Tech students gain an equivalent of 2.5 grade levels in math after one year at the school and 1.5 grades levels in one year in reading.¹⁰

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Chafee, L. (2013). Expanded Learning Opportunities Are Key to Student Learning. Expanding Minds and Opportunities, 18-20. Washington, DC: Collaborative Communications Group.

⁸ Doll, J., Eslami, Z., & Walters, L. (2013). Are They Pushed or Pulled, or Do They Fall Out? A Comparative Analysis of Seven Nationally

Representative Studies.

<http://sgo.sagepub.com/content/3/4/2158244013503834>.

⁹ SIATech. (2014). Overview.

<http://www.siatech.org/about/index.php>.

¹⁰ SIATech. (2014). Our Story.

http://www.siatech.org/about/about_story.php.

Los Angeles Reconnections Academy

The Los Angeles California Reconnections Academy (LARCA) initiative targets youth who have dropped out of high school. This model provides a pathway back into education that includes gaining vocational training and focuses on getting the student into post-secondary training and education.¹¹ Funding for this model began with a federal grant to the Los Angeles City and County Workforce Investment Boards with a focus on job training and now is operated by a consortium of organizations and agencies including the investment boards, chamber of commerce, school district, mayor's office, community college, and other local social service organizations. LARCA operates in community centers and attempts to meet the student where they are academically in a non-traditional environment.

When creating the program, developers found that many students were not comfortable in a traditional school setting. The model is tailored to meet the job skill needs of the student, which helps enhance knowledge in core academic subjects and places the student on one of three burgeoning career pathways: healthcare, construction, and green technology. While the program is less than two years old, LARCA is already meeting their goals of enrolling over 1,200 students. A study of the success of this model is currently underway.¹²

These are just two models that offer students a skill-based learning approach that increases a student's computer skills and incorporates core subject education. Often times these programs are created as a charter-school, however, creative use of existing school space using a push-in model approach or partnering with nearby community centers poses other possibilities for implementing such a program. Many older students, some out of necessity, believe they are ready for the working world. The skill-based approach can help keep students on track for graduating high school

while providing them with a specific and applicable skill.

Enhancement Models

Not every student with the potential for dropping out needs a new environment. Some students require an intensive, wrap-around structure adapted to their needs to ensure that they graduate. Community schools, a model in which a school has an intensive and integrated academic and social support network on-site, provide a context for this type of support.¹³ Recognizing that not all schools or districts will have resources for this type of model, there are other support enhancement programs that work intensively with students in the traditional school environment.

Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection

Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection, an affiliate of Hillside Family of Agencies, is a youth development program that aims to increase graduation rates and prepare students to enter college or the workplace.¹⁴ The concept was initiated by Wegmans, a New York state-based grocery store chain, which wanted to address the dropout crisis. The program provides a holistic support system to youth that qualify for entry into the program. Entry is dependent on meeting at least two of six risk factors, which include income and academic grades among other factors.

As a part of the holistic approach, services include academic assistance, life skills development, and referral to social supports. Participants are also provided a job at a Wegmans grocery store, which to maintain they must be in good academic standing. If a student falls below academic or behavioral expectations, then the individual is placed on leave until

¹¹ Los Angeles Career Connections Academy. (2014). <http://lansync.org/success/la-reconnections-career-academy>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ National Center for Community Schools. (2014). FAQs on Community Schools. <http://nationalcenterforcommunityschools.childrengroups.org/faqs/on-community-schools>.

¹⁴ Hillside Family of Agencies. (2014). Hillside Work-Scholarship Connection. <http://www.hillside.com/hwscpgc.aspx>.

expectations are met. Students enroll in the program in seventh through ninth grade and have continued support for up to two years after high school graduation. The program also helps students with post-secondary attainment including college visits and filling out college applications and financial aid forms. Hillside operates in New York State and in Prince George's County, Maryland. The outcomes for the over 4,800 Hillside participants in Prince George's County are exceptional with a graduation rate of over 90 percent versus 74 percent of the general student population. In addition, almost all of students go on to a college or a post-secondary technical school.¹⁵

Dubuque Model

Wrap-around and dropout re-engagement strategies can also show success on a smaller scale. A community initiative in semi-rural Dubuque, Iowa named 'Re-Engage Dubuque' aims to re-engage recent dropouts by providing a coach/mentor to help connect potential drop out students to an educational program that fits their needs and connects them to community social supports and resources.¹⁶ The initiative is a partnership that includes the Dubuque Community School District, Northeast Iowa Community College (NICC), and Project HOPE. The Dubuque community realized that for a district their size, it could personally reach out to most all of the dropout students and design a plan to keep those youth connected to their education through getting them back on track to earning either a high school diploma or a GED. Along with planning out an academic pathway, the coaches help the students meet their basic and employment needs. This assistance will increase the likelihood that they will stay in school. The model began in the 2012-13 school year and so far 85 percent of the district's 125 dropout students have been re-engaged and are on-track to earning a diploma or GED with attainment outcomes available in the 2014-15 school year.¹⁷ The Dubuque model

provides a workable approach to decreasing the dropout rate for rural and semi-rural areas.

Often times, dropout students are not just disconnected to school but are struggling to cope with challenging personal situations.¹⁸ Supplemental, individually-focused support can change students' lives and give them the boost they need to earn their diplomas.

Conclusion

Alternative programs are vital to increasing high school graduation rates and more importantly, getting more students college and/or career ready. However this option can only be effective if:

- Existing alternative schools are improved
- Non-traditional formats are included to accommodate the student base
- Skill-based education is offered
- Strong social supports are offered in the traditional school environment

There are promising and successful examples in Maryland and around the nation where alternative programs are working well. It is possible to Graduate Maryland.

*The Alternative Programs component is one of the key areas under the **Graduate Maryland** initiative. For more information about Graduate Maryland, go to www.acy.org.*

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Dubuque Community Schools. (2014). Re-Engage Dubuque. <http://www.dbqschools.org/re-engage/index.html>.

¹⁷ Habegger, B. (2013, August 21). Dubuque's dropout re-engagement program marks one year and big successes. KWWL Television.

<http://www.kwwl.com/story/23223884/2013/08/21/dubuques-dropout-re-engagement-program-marks-one-year-and-big-successes>.

¹⁸ Doll, J., Eslami, Z., & Walters, L. (2013). Are They Pushed or Pulled, or Do They Fall Out? A Comparative Analysis of Seven Nationally Representative Studies. <http://sgo.sagepub.com/content/3/4/2158244013503834>.