



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
LANSING



THOMAS D. WATKINS, JR.
SUPERINTENDENT OF
PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

February 27, 2004

MEMORANDUM

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Thomas D. Watkins, Jr., Chairman

SUBJECT: Presentation by Ryan Donlan Regarding *Finding our Lost Souls* - The Bay-Arenac Community High School Approach

Attached is a position paper titled *Finding our Lost Souls – High School Dropout Presentation for the State of Michigan* submitted by Ryan A. Donlan, Superintendent of the Bay-Arenac Community High School.

The report presents two primary themes (1) strategies employed in making second chance chartered high schools successful, and (2) suggestions for implementing the No Child Left Behind Act and Adequate Yearly Progress consequences more equitable in second chance chartered high schools.

Mr. Donlan has the spirit, energy, passion, and compassion to help capture the far too many young adults who drop out or are pushed out of our schools. If our state is to prosper, we must find ways to help our children in school obtain the knowledge and skills necessary not just to survive, but also to thrive in the 21st Century. Gone are the days that a young adult could drop out of school and get a job in the factory, join the military, or work on the family farm.

Governor Granholm called for the creation of Learn to Earn Centers to be created under the leadership of intermediate school districts in the following communities: Saginaw, Berrien, Wayne, Oakland, Genesee, and Ingham. These centers will be creative new opportunities for young men and women to get the education they need and deserve. Ms. Elaine Madigan and Mr. David Mills are the lead staff on this project for the Michigan Department of Education.

Mr. Donlan will be at the March 9, 2004, Board meeting to highlight one model that is going the extra mile to meet the needs of today's youth. We will highlight other models at future Board meetings.

I am excited and pleased to present Mr. Donlan, another great example of the tremendous educators that are helping to create a brighter future for us all. We must be reminded that a child without a high quality education today is an adult without hope or a future. We can and must do better.

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608 WEST ALLEGAN STREET • P.O. BOX 30008 • LANSING, MICHIGAN 48909
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Finding our Lost Souls

High School Dropout Prevention for the State of Michigan

A position paper submitted by Ryan A. Donlan, Superintendent of Bay-Arenac Community High School, to the Michigan State Board of Education and State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Watkins

Dear Honorable State Board of Education Members and Superintendent Tom Watkins:

We are at an exciting and monumental time in our great State of Michigan. Schools have re-energized with a new and heightened sense of quality and accountability for our state's children. The Michigan Department of Education has dynamic and profound leadership and direction, and our State Board's membership is unsurpassed in both its intellect and selfless dedication to our schools and students.

Education YES!, a comprehensive and exciting model for assessment and accountability of schools, has been launched successfully through the myriad of variables and challenges that confront new and sweeping initiatives, and quite soon, children at early grade levels will be assured that they will possess the skills and competencies that will allow most all to rise above the trials and tribulations of early adolescence, continuing successfully through high school toward success beyond.

Society as a whole, however, is not so fortunate. Sweeping crime, teen pregnancies, homelessness, poverty, violence, and many other variables of abject "awfulness" still confront hundreds upon thousands in the cities, suburbs, and rural areas of Michigan. It is in this context that we all must confront a harsh reality that has historically plagued our schools and our communities: At-risk youth who choose to drop out of school.

The costs are staggering, including the qualitative variables of lives lost and dreams unfulfilled, as well as the quantifiable variables of the costs of incarceration and the welfare state, not to mention victimization through crimes of desperation, hopelessness, and anger at one's lot in life, as compared to others. We all know in our hearts that we must study closer this phenomenon and take sweeping steps to fix this problem. A realist could conclude that until we fix society, we will not erase completely the thoughts of dropping out from our teen population. Yet, even if this is the case, our great state can certainly refine our system of school services so that appropriate interventions and supports are provided for these kids to "make a difference."

In particular, that's where we come in – you as State School Leaders and all of us in the field of 2nd chance, alternative high school education for at-risk students. By sharing a frank and honest dialogue of practices underway, as well as an honest discussion of some much-needed considerations under Education YES! and *No Child Left Behind* for 2nd chance schools serving at-risk students, we can truly move forward toward finding these lost souls and making a difference in their lives.

The entire State of Michigan has a wonderful opportunity here. Thank you for giving me the opportunity for this presentation.

-- Ryan A. Donlan

Introduction

The State of Michigan has an obligation, and an opportunity, to substantially improve the plight of at-risk youth, ages 16 – 20, those who are considering dropping out of high school, as well as those who have dropped out already. These students can be saved!

Doing so, however, depends upon the State of Michigan's implementation of three powerful and all-important strategies:

- (1) Finding those dropped out, and those considering dropping out;**
- (2) Providing and protecting high quality, 2nd chance schools and programs, both traditional district alternative schools and especially charter alternative high schools *(for strategic reasons pertaining to the beliefs currently maintained in the U.S. Dept. of Education, which will be mentioned later in this paper); and*
...**
- (3) Implementing a comprehensive, statewide, community-based network of educators, businesses, social services agencies, governmental officials, and civic leaders, whose expressed intent it is to tackle, head-on, the issues of at-risk youth and the dropout phenomenon.**

This paper offers key thoughts in these very important areas, as well as requests for support from the Michigan Department of Education.

Strategy (1): Finding those dropped out – i.e. “Finding our Lost Souls.” Enclosed below is one school’s approach to identifying those ready to give up on school and marketing programs and services to them.

**Finding our Lost Souls
The Bay-Arenac Community High School Approach**

ISSUE: Countless youth, ages 16 – 18, give up on traditional high school education each year, seeing no immediate pay-off for their efforts. They drop out. These kids are telling us, through actions more than words, that their needs are not being met. They are seeking life direction and meaningfulness, and they haven’t found it. So they are trying something else ... something besides the path of high school completion. For some, their disillusionment has built over years and years of frustration and failure, and thus, they are taking what they feel is a bold action to “right their lives,” as they see it and drop from school.

Our philosophy is that frustrated youth may need to try something else besides their traditional schools for high school completion, something that may work for them, in the short run and will pay off in the long run. Unfortunately, not all of those who are frustrated with school try other educational options. Many drop out altogether.

Of these kids, some will invariably, at different rates and times, hit rock bottom, seeing for themselves what a life without a high school education will accord them – minimum wage jobs, few opportunities for benefits, poverty, brushes with the law, and a general unhappiness of goals not reached and a life not maximized. When this happens, they often make the personally empowered decision to come back, more often than not to ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS. That’s when things begin to work for them. For these students, dropping out of school is a prime opportunity for an ongoing interpersonal conversation and a reflective life lesson. Unfortunately, this happy ending is not present for all.

THE BIG CONCERN, AS WE SEE IT, IS THREEFOLD: In the case of frustrated students who are wrestling with these issues, three questions must be asked and answered: (1) Who is contacting these lost souls during this time of “dropping out,” offering a lifeline of opportunity and a path toward re-entry? (2) What opportunities are present, throughout Michigan, for the lost souls when they decide to re-enter school? (3) What can be done so that students do not feel the need to dropout in the first place (either by our presenting options to them or by fixing the existing structure of programs and services in traditional schools)?

One district's plan of action will now be presented -- that of Bay-Arenac Community High School, a longstanding ISD alternative program that started in 1985 for "kids on the streets." In fact, one of the original criteria was that a student had to literally be "on the street" for at least a year to merit admission status. Never did program originators want this school to appear to be an "easy out" for those in traditional schools.

This 2nd chance school was chartered, out of necessity to continue operation in 1995, when knee-jerk reactions over the potential financial uncertainty of Proposal A caused area superintendents to pull funding from the ISD-wide program. The ISD now serves as the charter authorizer, rather than as a direct administrator of the program, and the services of Bay-Arenac Community High School have continued, literally "saving lives" for nearly 20 years now in Bay and Arenac Counties.

The unique methods through which the school turns lives around, once kids and young adults arrive on its doorstep, are multifaceted and would merit detailed mention in another report. However, this report's focus is on the school's efforts (a) to save kids from dropping out IN THE FIRST PLACE by presenting its program as an option and (b) to recapture those who have dropped and redirect them toward high school completion.

SAVING THOSE NOT YET DROPPED-OUT

What do we do (from a first-person perspective)?

The BACHS formula includes:

1. **Word of Mouth Advertising** – Students in our school help recruit friends and family members in an ongoing fashion, all year around. This has grown dramatically, and has been the best source of referrals, for nearly two decades. We continually provide our students the official information/enrollment sheets in our front office bin so that they can take these to their friends, at the moment and on the very day they realize that a person is ready to give up on school. These sheets serve as a lifeline of hope, passed from one friend to the other, that a new setting might make a difference. Each semester, we have a student competition, wherein prizes are awarded to our students for the most referrals of "needy" students to our program.
2. **Ongoing School Visits for Interested Students** – Our students are very proud of our setting and love to shepherd their friends from other schools who are here with visitors' passes. We allow this continually and strive to meet with all visitors to show them that caring adults really do exist and light really does exist at the end of their high school journey.

3. **Court Contacts** – We meet continually with Juvenile and Adult Probation Officers and make presentations at the court’s day treatment/lock-up program, so that students involved with the court, hear from court officials and school officials, that a smaller, safe school with a supportive and caring staff, really does exist for them. In particular, most truant students are running from something – academic frustration and failure, bullying and harassment, etc., and we continually ask court officials to allow their students to visit for a day, even if it is while they are on “jail release.”
4. **Superintendent Meetings** – Monthly, our charter school Superintendent sits with all local Superintendents at the ISD Superintendents’ Roundtable Meetings, and routinely discusses cases wherein students in local districts are causing trouble, or are getting in trouble, so that preventative referrals can be made to our program. Sometimes, we accept students as an option for schools and families, in order to avoid permanent expulsion from other districts.
5. **Principal/Counselor Contacts**-- We also are in contact with Principals and Counselors, through telephone contacts, brochures, visits, and letters each year – especially in mid-year, as well as in the spring and summer months, so that they have the opportunity to share our informational materials with struggling students and parents, during the scheduling process for the next year.
6. **Special Programs Referrals** – Key Special Educators in the ISD (special education teachers, school social workers, teacher consultants, etc.) as well as key program coordinators, such as Native American Student Liaisons, Military Recruiters, etc. are contacted each semester and are encouraged to refer their students who are struggling to our program. This has been especially helpful for 5th year senior students who have already spent four years in high school and see returning to their traditional school for another year as a stigma that they would much rather avoid.
7. **Child Care** – We offer (and market to students and schools) a licensed, award-winning Child Care Center on-site, for the infants and toddlers of teen parents, providing meals, activities, nap time, changing, and the opportunity for young moms and dads to feed and nurture their babies during school each day. FIA reimbursement is accepted, and students are charged only a small “responsibility fee” for the care provided. BACHS is now in its 2nd generation of kids, offering a high school education to youth that were formerly in the Child Care Center as babies.

SAVING THOSE ALREADY DROPPED-OUT

What do we do? Where do we find these kids?

1. **Word of Mouth Contacts** – Each week, we have whole-school meetings to discuss matters pertinent to our school, to award students for good work, etc. A few times each semester, we have heart-to-heart talks with our kids about reaching out to those they know, on the streets, who have not yet “tuned back in” to education. Our students find friends and family members for us, and bring them back to school.
2. **Courthouse Conversations** – For the adult population, the Superintendent finds that direct contact to those in the courthouse, awaiting disposition or sentencing, works best for the adult population. Because he is often in the downtown court with our students, he talks continually with others in the hallways and courtrooms, who appear to be 17 – 20, about dropping back into school. One might call this direct marketing – “Superintendent to Prospective Student” -- at the courthouse – aimed at those who are in trouble and need to take definitive steps toward “getting their lives together.” We call this the “toe in the water” approach. Students (in this case “defendants”) need to do everything they can to satisfy the court that they are “making good decisions,” and thus stick their toe in the water of education, long enough to satisfy those making a disposition. Our hope is that once they get their toes in the water, the feet and bodies will follow, and we strive to encourage this.
3. **Employer Marketing** – High School dropouts usually gravitate toward certain jobs in the community. A few notable types of organizations that employ these folks for menial or service labor are: car washes, restaurants, direct telephone marketing companies, grocery stores, Laundromats, and gas stations/convenience stores. Once each year, BACHS mass markets fliers, brochures, and letters, addressing them directly to the managers of these facilities, asking that they refer their employees who have not yet finished high school, and assuring the employers that we will work around their employees’ work schedules so as not to unduly burden the employers. We have found that in many cases, employers will hang our brochures in their companies, as well as talking with those employed.
4. **Community Conversations** – The Superintendent and staff members, as salespersons, continually talk about our school to those they meet, especially if they appear to be “lost souls.” In the grocery store lines, at the gas station, at local downtown festivals ... staff members strive, through a community outreach sales pitch, to offer hope to those who may be “tuned out,” but marginally interested in tuning back in to school. We reach out to these folks in a very nonchalant, non-threatening manner that salvages their pride and hopefully motivates them toward taking a careful, cautious “checking us out.”

5. **Marketing/Brochures, Billboards, Radio, Etc.** – Although our best marketing is word of mouth, we also never underestimate the power of a strategically developed marketing campaign. Primarily, we see this as a way of expanding our program’s availability to those who may not know our students or staff, yet those who may need us. We have placed brochures from our 2nd chance school in Community Agency waiting rooms, all over the county, such as police stations, women’s shelters, homeless missions, courthouses, etc. Billboards have offered thousands the opportunity to learn about us through pictures and slogans (pictures of teen parents with babies, happy graduates, etc. and slogans, such as “A 2nd Chance ... or a 1st Choice,” “Alternative ... and Proud Of IT!” and “A Distinctively Different High School Experience”). Further, our radio campaign has targeted everyone from caring grandparents who listen to the Oldies, to parents and students who listen to Classic Rock or Hip Hop. It’s oftentimes surprising to discover the number of at-risk students who are cared for by grandparents, rather than their own parents. In the future, we’re planning to expand this effort to placemats in coffee shops (so even the waitresses can see our ads), as well as an expansion to stroller stations in local malls and hospital maternity wards.
6. **Saving those too old for high school** – Just because a person is over the age of 20 doesn’t mean that we don’t provide services for them. Oftentimes, we allow them to use our school to seek-out or call area adult education programs or GED preparation programs. How do we find these students? Through all of the aforementioned methods ... and through unannounced visits. Many, many of these students simply drop by out of the blue and ask if they can “come back to high school.” Rather than responding, “You’re too old and must seek help elsewhere,” we ask them in, talk with them extensively about their goals, counsel them toward educational opportunities, and even make calls on their behalf and set up appointments with adult education programs. We have even asked adult educators to drive over and meet with prospective students who were more comfortable attending meetings in our building. Numerous times, we have gone on line with them to show them how to prepare for their GEDs, or how to access review materials. We help them with their resumes and cover letters so that they can find employment conducive to their adult education schedules, and we celebrate with them and even frame their GED certificates if they bring them back and show them to us. In short, just because a student may not qualify for high school anymore, doesn’t mean that our ethical and moral obligation to them as a student or person subsides.
7. **Open doors and networks make all the difference!** It should be stressed that all community members, whether they’re parents or not, can visit our school at anytime to see our programs or to obtain information. This open door policy brings great cooperation from all in our local community, with regards to our programs and services, as well as creating opportunities for students in 2nd chance schools. Leadership Bay County, a local civic leader training program, sponsored

by the Bay-Area Chamber of Commerce, visits yearly to learn about our programs and services, and local legislators are oftentimes in the building to visit and help with programs and presentations. Our school is also a member of the Bay-Area Chamber of Commerce and is involved in the community's Business/Education Partnership, which includes the CEO's and general managers of all major companies, the Presidents of the local colleges and Universities, and the Superintendents of all local public schools. BACHS makes its facilities available in the afternoons and evenings to scouting organizations and local soccer clubs, as well as for community road races and other seasonal events. When people, through networking or otherwise, learn about a 2nd chance school doing great things for lost souls, they spread the word. Open doors work wonders for public awareness and community support

In our opinion, what motivates students who have dropped-out, more than anything else, is a CARING, TRUSTED ADULT WHO OFFERS HOPE. Person to person ... heart to heart!

Students' knowing that they can return to a safe school with high standards and a respectable diploma helps also, as does a belief that their school has stable employment and a staff that will be there for them as they make the journey toward graduation.

This need for stability lends itself to the next section of this position paper, wherein I describe some of the variables currently affecting the potential survival – or not – of 2nd chance schools.

Strategy (2): Providing and protecting high quality, 2nd chance schools and programs, both traditional district alternative schools and charter alternative schools

The true key to recapturing our state's drop-out population is for the State of Michigan to offer incentives to school systems so that they will create, expand, and/or operate 2nd chance schools who serve at-risk students (charter schools included).

Also, educators – the persons in the trenches -- need protection, yes protection, if they are to focus on the most needy students and market to those who are the lost souls -- not physical protection, but institutional and governmental protection. Some feel that their jobs and careers are in jeopardy. In short, schools and educators need assurances that if they cater to the most needy students, ages 16 - 20, then they will not be inadvertently and unintentionally penalized under Ed YES! or *No Child Left Behind*.

Currently, 2nd chance high schools are in peril of being inadvertently and unintentionally penalized under the state and federal assessment systems because of the fact that they accept those students who have the most marginal of skills. Their mission puts them at-risk of closure.

This “state of peril” is not intentionally in place, of course, but at present, it is certainly “by design” under the current models of Education YES! and *No Child Left Behind*.

Considerations and modifications need to be implemented if dropouts are to be saved and if 2nd chance alternative schools are to continue. Thankfully, Dr. Hughes is studying this issue, but for the sake of the State Board of Education's awareness, I now present this information to the Board from the perspective of many in the Bay area educational, business, social services, courts, and civic leadership communities.

“STRAIGHT TALK”

Key questions to consider if high school dropouts are to be saved

QUESTION ONE: With a phenomenal system of assessment and accountability in place through Education YES! and No Child Left Behind, how are we placing these 2nd chance schools in peril? How could they be penalized under a model that almost in its entirety, is good for kids, schools, and for the State of Michigan?

MEAP scores are invaluable and important. The MEAP test is a remarkably good test and a great experience for all Michigan students. Yet, MEAP scores of at-risk students in 2nd chance schools, under the present system, do not serve as the best measuring sticks of a school's worth and the educational program in place. Take into consideration the following:

Most students in at-risk high school programs graduate when they are 19 or 20, and many of them come to us for the first time when they are 16 or 17, within a year or so of taking the MEAP. Most have been away from school from between one semester and 3 years when they arrive (many were truant long before the age of 16). These youth have been on the streets, hanging out, committing crimes, having children, but in most cases ... they have not been studying their academics. One can easily surmise what most test scores will reveal at that point.

A question from skeptics -- those outside of the trenches of “at-risk students and 2nd chance schools” -- is often posed as such: If students, even those considered at-risk, arrive at 2nd chance school with (or near) “junior credits,” shouldn't they be ready for the MEAP?

In theory, yes. However, most theory breaks down when at-risk kids arrive off the streets onto our doorstep. The explanation: Many of the credits they bring with them on their transcripts were the product of cheating, or simply the product of a kid being passed on so that he/she wouldn't have to be dealt with at that level again. Other credits are the product of remarkably watered-down coursework, where most of the at-risk students reside for many years. It truly IS a fact that at-risk kids are just not ready for the 11th grade test until a couple of years after they arrive, in most cases.

Yet under the present system, this is not given consideration. The kids simply take the MEAP, as is scheduled for traditional students who do not have all of the baggage and histories that our students have on board. Then, 2nd chance schools are graded. What happens next?

After kids are tested and scores are reported, these same students may still spend three or more years in that very same alternative school, building their academic skills and working toward graduation. It truly takes a while for many of these kids – they aren't magically back on the full-time, regularly scheduled student progression toward graduation, even after they tune-back-into school. And for schools maintaining steadfast high standards, this process may take even longer. Many of us realize that graduation rates percentages, as currently calculated in the State of Michigan (with a four-year high school experience being the only appropriate avenue toward a high grade in this area) are completely inapplicable to 2nd chance schools. In fact, rushing kids toward a diploma would necessitate that we sacrifice the skills that we promise the state that our students will possess.

Thus, aside from the “graduation rate” dilemma -- for an at-risk school, the MEAP is more a FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT than it is a SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT (an entrance exam rather than an exit exam) -- more an indication of the students' past 12 years of schooling before coming to our school, than it is an indication of the quality of education “at the present location.”

Yet, the 2nd chance school whose mission it is to educate those students is graded – and in many cases is graded negatively -- according to the students' skills on 11th grade MEAP tests, taken when these kids still have 3 years left in school.

That's one of the reasons why the educators therein are worried about their jobs, and their future. That's why there is little present incentive in the State of Michigan to work with these kids, other than one's own selfless dedication and compassion.

QUESTION TWO: Why should we give these 2nd chance alternative schools and at-risk students additional considerations under the state's assessment model?

The students whom we serve are transient and move from school-to school frequently. Each semester and year, radically different populations come to us from all walks of life. We work and work with them, though their comings and goings, pregnancies and jail terms, deportations and the like. Through this myriad of activity, we make connections, provide role modeling, and offer help – then thankfully, over time, our “success stories” many, many of them, stay with us, making better decisions until graduation day and beyond. This isn't, however, without a lot of turnover, a lot of coming and going, and a lot of marginal attendance along the way. Factors, such as family violence, incarceration, and runaway youth intervene in attendance percentages and student contact time, as well as with graduation rates. Hardly any students in 2nd chance schools graduate in 4 years; that's a fact. It's a very fluid and never-constant student audience.

Thus, even the current Education YES! Small School Strategies for compiling multi-year MEAP participation numbers (adding consecutive years until the sample group reaches 30 students), then combining these scores together to calculate Education YES! grades, are absolutely not fair to schools serving at-risk, transient populations who, in most cases (coming from a variety of schools, streets, shelters, jails, etc.) are not privy to the same instructional sequences in the two or three school years prior to the assessment year, when such is the case with most other small schools serving traditional students.

AGAIN, THIS IS A VERY IMPORTANT POINT THAT SMALL SCHOOL STRATEGIES, CURRENTLY IN USE FOR CALCULATING EDUCATION YES! GRADES WITH TRADITIONAL, SMALL SCHOOLS, DO NOT FAIRLY ASSESS THE WORTH OF SMALL, ALTERNATIVE 2ND CHANCE PROGRAMS WITH EXTREMELY TRANSIENT POPULATIONS OF marginally skilled students. THEY PUT OUR FUTURE IN JEOPARDY.

For many, if not most, at-risk students -- it takes a school at least two years to deprogram a student from a degenerative worldview and rewire the student for success.

QUESTION THREE: Are the potential consequences under the current *No Child Left Behind* and Education YES! more serious for charter alternatives, than they are for alternative schools within traditional districts?

Yes. Charter alternatives high schools for at-risk students are faced with two specific challenges at this time that alternative high schools run by traditional districts do not face. This puts us in grave danger, which is sad, due to the fact that our mission makes us one of the most collaborative models of charter schools existing to date, with respect to the relationship between our school and surrounding local traditional districts. We fulfill a need that they have difficulty addressing, and we are in peril of closure.

The first challenge has to do with Title funding. In many cases, traditional districts receive Title funds from the federal government, yet they spend that money primarily at the elementary and/or middle school level. This practice, which results in their alternative high school programs “not being labeled as Title buildings,” holds harmless these secondary, traditional district alternative programs from the punitive, or should I say “corrective” measures that could come about from “not making AYP,” which is entirely based upon MEAP scores. Thus, they avoid the eventual consequences, such as firing the principal and all “relevant” staff, including teachers, if MEAP scores for at-risk students are not in line with neighboring districts serving traditional students as per state and federal standards.

Charter alternative high schools that qualify for Title funding are not held harmless here; they are absolutely in peril of closure under the present model. Staff members in those buildings, many of whom spend 60 – 70 hours per week, working at 1/2 the salaries of traditional district counterparts, not only have to worry about educating the most difficult

youth; they must also worry about losing their jobs for serving the most challenged under the current model.

One might ask – Isn't it appropriate to levy "corrective measures" if these schools are accepting federal Title money? The answer – "YES," if the assessment mechanism is fair, yet "NO," if the mission is misunderstood, if the measuring stick is not fair, or if the federal money brings with it a "death sentence" that has best intentions for children, but Leaves High School At-Risk Youth Behind.

The second challenge has to do with appropriate recognition of "status" in the State of Michigan's School Code Master, the state's database for school building information. At present, high school alternative charter programs serving at-risk students are not allowed to designate themselves, appropriately as alternative programs, in the state's database of schools. Chartered alternative programs have been misdesignated as "9 – 12 high schools," rather than as alternative programs. Currently, any local superintendent across the State of Michigan can designate his/her program as alternative, yet charter superintendents, and even ISD authorizers are not allowed to do so.

This is especially worrisome in that if the State Board of Education decides to allow an alternative assessment model under Education YES! for 2nd chance, alternative schools serving at-risk kids, then charter alternatives may be left on the side lines, evaluated as "failures" with no consideration for their status, and with no technological capability for Dr. Hughes' office to access our true status in the state's data base before calculating performance grades.

This is a data entry problem that needs to be immediately solved, and if it's a larger statutory problem of some kind, then it needs to be examined thoroughly, because it doesn't make sense, and it handicaps the Michigan Department of Education in its quest to ensure that all of our students and schools are uplifted to higher levels of success.

QUESTION FOUR: Why is it important to protect our high school charter alternative programs, in particular, those serving at-risk students, especially if the true number of these programs is quite small?

With respect to leadership and legislation in the State of Michigan, this particular model of a charter school, one that specifically serves the most challenging students at the high school level – especially wherein neighboring traditional district superintendents and principals refer their most "challenged" to those programs – would seem to be serving as an ideal model of service and collaboration, engendering support from all sides of the educational and political spectrums. All debate aside; everyone can agree that this is a service and a model that's much needed. The importance of this model serving as a common ground for reasoned dialogue on the worth of charter schools, and how they can best be modeled to serve our communities, cannot be understated.

With respect to communities, the more options you provide to struggling at-risk, high school students and families, the better – especially if the model promotes productive citizenship and quality educational achievement. Students need these schools, although not many exist as charter alternative high schools today. Plus, the rigorous oversight process, by ISD authorizers and by the Michigan Department of Education, coupled with the quality minded autonomy of Local Chartering Boards, ensures that every possible practice that’s good for the struggling youth will be employed to make them successful.

With respect to Michigan’s place in the national arena and our compliance under ***No Child Left Behind***, the Charter School Model for 2nd Chance High Schools can serve as a key component to “quality recognition” of a state’s plan by the feds. The Federal Government, last fall, stated that alternative education, as delivered throughout the nation is a “failed initiative.” (*October High School Reform Conference, Washington D.C.*). The Federal Government, however, did mention that the jury was still out on the success of charter schools, and that it could not render a decision as to their effectiveness at that time; however, charters were being studied carefully.

If the U.S. Department of Education has truly engrained its perspective against the alternative school approach for raising achievement for at-risk youth in our schools, then it may behoove the State of Michigan to support initiatives (or models) that may still engender support, under this particular Federal Administration, at the State Level. It’s a strategic method of foregoing debate on a closed minded perspective, but allowing for a new model to present itself to the mind that is still open, as we work to save kids and obtain the Federal Government’s blessing on State activities.

QUESTION FIVE: Is there a more effective and accurate method of assessment for all alternative schools, both traditional district alternative and charter alternative – and one that can work within the context of the very successful and valuable Education YES!?

Absolutely. The State of Michigan can assess 2nd chance schools on the academic GROWTH they make with these students during the time spent in school, once re-enrolled, instead of on the academic skills the students bring to the table when they arrive. Realizing that GROWTH assessment of MEAP data was so cumbersome that it was taken out of the original model of Education YES!, I would like to suggest that other assessment tests can be used.

Superintendent Tom Watkins was kind enough to provide me with an article entitled, ***Achieving Reading Proficiency for All***, by Willard R. Daggett, Ed.D., from the International Center for Leadership in Education, shortly after he returned from the National Conference for Chief State School Officers in the Summer of 2003.

Dr. Daggett, in the article, mentions that the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) offers one such assessment that will analyze value added education through an academic GROWTH analysis, within a school. We at Bay-Arenac Community High School have implemented the NWEA assessment this year, and we are excited of the prospect that we will be able to measure GROWTH in math and reading skills (yes, the “value of the education delivered in a given year”) for each classroom -- each teacher, and each student.

Of course, other models of GROWTH assessment may present themselves as viable options meriting further study by the Department.

QUESTION SIX: If MEAP is to be used for at-risk students in alternative schools, is there a better time for the test?

As mentioned before, MEAP is a quality test, and every student should participate in it at one time or another.

Yet, if MEAP is to be used as an instrument of assessment, why not assess at-risk students in 2nd chance schools on the MEAP as an exit exam from high school (or at least at a time which corresponds to the end of their “2nd to the last year”), instead of what, for all practicality, is an entrance exam under the current system? That would seem to make sense. In fact, with the test aversion that most of our at-risk students face, why not allow them to take the MEAP more than once and offer the 2nd chance program an opportunity to be assessed on the best score. This would seemingly level the playing field for these programs, considering the baggage that their students bring to the school with them.

A question often arises in the Alternative Education World: Should we be exempt from the MEAP? My response -- Absolutely NOT. Great caution and restraint must be exercised by those of us in alternative education so that we do not seek exemption from MEAP testing simply because “we are alternative.” That would be a cop-out. EVERY alternative, at-risk student and 2nd chance school in Michigan can benefit from kids’ taking the MEAP test, as it is a true measure of higher level thinking skills, and it accords students opportunities for college financing.

I say all this as a substantial believer in the MEAP and in a school which strives to get 100% MEAP participation – and is very successful in getting kids to participate ... the very same students, mind you, who have failed miserably on most all tests they have taken, have usually skipped-out of most test taking sessions, and would probably be written-off as part of the 5% of those who didn’t take the tests in most districts, under the 95% AYP Participation regulation.

Nothing in the MEAP is bad, but kids in 2nd chance schools need a different timeframe for test taking if that assessment is to be used, and a little different “weighting system” to determine the school’s worth and success as an institution.

QUESTION SEVEN: Will the current Education YES! and *No Child Left Behind* models of assessment really drive the good teachers away from at-risk students?

Until our educators, themselves, feel protected from being cast as “failed educators” for serving our most needy, they may be forced or influenced into seeking other sources of employment. Selflessness can only go so far when folks have mortgages to pay and bills piling up -- in a system that inadvertently, yet inaccurately disparages the worth 2nd chance alternative schools ... and in the case of charters and others with Title funding, one that threatens people’s jobs under the label of “restructuring.”

Now this assertion, although unscientific, tells me that over time, this system may drive the best teachers and administrators to work with the students who need them the least – not those who need them the most. Our staff members, as one example, have heard clearly from spouses who worry that we are operating in a seemingly unfriendly environment destined for closure -- for 1/2 the pay of comparable colleagues in neighboring districts. These spouses want security for their families, and I surmise that it’s only a matter of time before security is what they will get. Our lost souls need these people, and these programs, and I hope that something can be done soon so that our best teachers continue working with the most needy students.

Are these teachers afraid of letter grades? Absolutely not. In fact, these staff members feel that they must continue striving for higher degrees of professional excellence on behalf of kids. They are fearful, however, that their mission is not understood, and further, that it is destined for eradication under the restructuring measures of *No Child Left Behind*, and they truly believe that if the State of Michigan values what they are doing with kids, then the state can and should save them, through an amended plan for “Meeting AYP” for 2nd chance schools.

QUESTION EIGHT: Is a High Standards Model of Assessment possible – in line with the spirit and mission of Education YES! -- for 2nd chance schools serving at-risk students?

Of course it is, and thankfully we have the Office of Dr. Hughes looking into this issue at present. Education YES! is a remarkable, multifaceted assessment and accountability system for most all schools in the State of Michigan, and one well respected throughout the country for sure. Dr. Jeremy Hughes was remarkably astute when he mentioned to the State Board of Education that one of the state’s key “Lessons Learned” from Year One was the necessity to peer deeper into the methods of assessment for alternative schools. The true challenge will be to develop an adaptation of Education YES! for these schools, which does not chip away at the high standards the State Board of Education has set for all schools in Michigan serving children. Yet, it can be done!

In fact, my office will present a draft model to Dr. Jeremy Hughes for his study and consideration in the weeks ahead, one that will include, but will not be limited to the following points:

1. Schools serving at-risk youth as 2nd chance, alternative schools should be officially identified as such by their ISD's or RESA's as such, in order to merit consideration for any "alternative assessment model" under Education YES! This will ensure that local oversight of status is occurring so that schools are appropriately identified for that consideration.
2. Schools serving at-risk youth must have their curriculums aligned to the State of Michigan's Benchmarks and Standards (or mapped to an aligned ISD curriculum) in order to merit "alternative assessment model" consideration. "Alternative" means an alternative delivery system or environment; it doesn't mean "alternative" to the standards and benchmarks expected of all schools.
3. Schools desiring "alternative assessment model" consideration should offer extended day programming, tutorial opportunities, and a variety of other classroom extension activities so as to maximize the opportunity for every student to achieve.

Other details serve as the "nuts and bolts" of the model and will be presented to the office of Dr. Jeremy Hughes, to be routed accordingly as Dr. Hughes deems appropriate. We are hopeful that our contributions and thoughts will be instrumental in the development of a statewide assessment model that would assure high quality programming for at-risk students and would serve as an incentive for most school districts to get in the business of saving our lost souls.

Strategy (3): Implementing a comprehensive, statewide, community-based network of educators, business, social services, governmental officials, and civic leaders, whose expressed intent it is to tackle, head-on, the issues of at-risk youth and the dropout phenomenon.

Enclosed below is a model envisioned for statewide use in bringing communities together to wrap their arms around our at-risk youth and teen dropouts, so that our villages get back in the business of raising our children ... especially the most needy.

Bay County is currently on its way to launching a pilot initiative, with the help of our Chamber of Commerce, Area Superintendents, Business/Education Partnership, and continued involvement with area Courts, Social Services Agencies, Families, and Community Members.

COMMUNITY-WIDE PROGRAM APPROACH

A dream currently being carefully launched as a pilot in Bay City

Local communities in the State of Michigan must initiate a powerful, comprehensive, and ongoing “Drop-out Prevention and Intervention Program,” one that will encourage youth and will provide incentives for 100% of those, aged 16 – 20, who *(a) are at-risk for dropping out (b) are considering dropping out or (c) have dropped out*, to continue with high school, building necessary skills, until completion of a diploma or graduation equivalency test. The program will ensure that no dropout will be forgotten, no dropout will be written-off, and, of course ... that no dropout will be left behind!

This program’s structure and mission will demonstrate a comprehensive collaboration among the following:

- Schools
- Churches
- Social Service Agencies
- Child Care Centers
- Civic and Political Leaders
- Businesses & Chambers of Commerce
- The Military
- Law Enforcement
- The Courts
- Local Colleges
- Parents, Families, and Neighborhood Associations

The Focus: Making School Count! Making School Available! Making School “Do-able” for those who are struggling.

Of course, the structures of the programs, themselves, may vary in design, based on the needs of each area-population center (ward, city, county, or ISD) as well as the resources available, but each will be designed powerfully to meet local needs and should be reassessed every few years to ensure that the programmatic components serve as remedies for the dynamic and changing societal challenges inherent in those population centers. Certain, underpinning characteristics, philosophies, and practices will be expected in each program and should be overseen and evaluated by the State of Michigan, such as:

1. Safe Schools with Flexible Schedules
2. Career Exploration, Work Experience Credit, and Job Shadowing
3. High Academic Standards and Key Academic Exit Outcomes
4. Child Care for Infants and Toddlers of Teen Parents
5. Community Service Opportunities and Expectations
6. Transitioning Activities to Higher Education and Job Training
7. Outreach and Awareness Activities to At-Risk Students on the Streets

Additional factors that must be considered if true dropout prevention and intervention is to be implemented statewide:

1. The Urban vs. Rural vs. Suburban Phenomenon -- Manifestations of behavior and psychological perspectives of at-risk youth are based, in part, on the context or setting in which they live. Sometimes ... with great peculiarity, more challenging circumstances are not necessarily correlated with more challenging kids.
2. Cultural, Religious, and Socio-Economical Factors that can influence the disaffection of youth -- Do we know whom we're dealing with here, and are we positioning, and educating, educators accordingly?
3. Are we marketing appropriately our 2nd chance options for schooling, both BEFORE and AFTER kids drop out of school. Part of the cure is finding the kids, at whatever age, and wherever they spend their time. Do we really “reach out” or are we awaiting their call?
4. The Crisis in School Leadership – Where have the firm, compassionate, and caring principals who live and breathe “tough love” gone? In our move beyond “Building Management” toward “Instructional Leadership,” have we lost something that (or someone who) kids really need? Are principals the “moms” or “dads” they need to be if kids don’t have them at home?

5. Educators – “On the same page?” Are we teachers of content ... or of students, and do we really work together for kids when we interact with one another? Do we talk enough to understand each other, are we shedding territoriality for the bigger picture, and are we reaching consensus about what matters the most?
6. The Most Important Consideration: Keeping Schools in the Business of Saving Kids and Measuring 2nd Chance High Schools for At-Risk Students – If kids are taken off the streets and placed into caring classrooms, shouldn't we measure these schools on the “academic growth” that students make while enrolled, rather than on standardized tests taken shortly after arrival? Why not offer exit exams at the time of exiting? Currently, these approaches have not made it into our statewide assessment model. The question then remains -- Are we inadvertently penalizing the educators who work with the most needy, and are we driving our best role models into “safer” jobs with kids who aren't at-risk? Education YES! needs one final “tweak,” and GROWTH should be added back into the pie.

CONCLUSION

With the intellect and leadership of all of those in the Office of the State Superintendent, and with the vision, care and commitment of our State Board of Education, the State of Michigan can truly and comprehensively save our at-risk youth who are in jeopardy of living lives unfulfilled and losing dreams of personal betterment, happiness, and success.

We can make a difference! This can only be done, however, when we decide to protect our most vital and committed educational surgeons so that true care and healing can occur. Once this happens, these miracle workers will truly have the strength to lead our communities on a journey toward selfless service, dedication to youth, and preservation of the American dream for all of our children.

Thank you for your thoughtful time and consideration. If I can serve in any capacity, large or small, to help the Office of the State Superintendent or State Board of Education on issues concerning our youth, or if Bay-Arenac Community High School in any way could serve as a pilot for any framework of assessment designed by Dr. Hughes and his staff, please do not hesitate to contact me at anytime.

Yours for the best and brightest future for all of Michigan's children,

Ryan A. Donlan