



Position Paper 12-3-12

Extended Time Funding Recommendation from Finance Working Group

Minnesota Alternative Programs serve students at-risk of not graduating or not graduating on time. These K-12 students who struggle in the traditional classroom, are behind with coursework, often have low self-esteem, low motivation, have family issues, and are discouraged to the point of having little hope of being successful in school or society.

Our concern with the Commissioner's Education Finance Working Group recommendation to roll extended time funding into the compensatory formula is that our most at-risk students will be shortchanged. Without extra support these at-risk students may not be able to attain their diploma, nor continue on with further education to help them to be productive members of our state and communities. The change does nothing to ensure services for at-risk students despite the added flexibility given to superintendents and school boards.

At-risk students are now served through a sophisticated set of "state approved alternative programs" (123A.05) developed over several decades. These include area learning centers, alternative learning programs, contract alternative programs and targeted services. Funding for these programs follow the student in an efficient and accountable manner.

Current programs are funded by statute to serve at-risk students thus assuring that these students will have services to help them catch up with their studies and to graduate from high school. At-risk students are specifically defined by statute (MS 124D.68) which states that "the legislature finds that it is critical to provide options for children to succeed in school."

The Commissioner's Education Finance Working Group, in an effort to simplify Minnesota education finance, has recommended to eliminate a number of categories that fund specific needs by rolling those areas into a category entitled compensatory aid. The previous categories lose their identity and local school districts are free to spend a larger pool of revenue as they wish. Those superintendents and school boards who regard the various categories of at-risk students less worthy than other pressing needs will eliminate or shortchange the programs serving at-risk students.

We cannot allow the matter of serving students at risk of not graduating to be left to the whim of local school districts. The entire rationale for existing programs serving at-risk students was built over years and has created efficient and effective systems. Efforts to make our case with the Minnesota Department of Education have apparently fallen upon deaf ears. They appear more interested in flexible funding (a worthy goal) than in providing for serving one of our most vulnerable groups of students.

The Legislature needs to specifically provide for at-risk student funding as a separate category or to ensure that school districts must serve at-risk students at least to the degree of current programs.