

The Need for Dropout Prevention and Recovery Charter Schools in Minnesota

We propose a new classification for charter high schools whose particular mission is to serve over-aged, under-credited students. These dropout prevention and recovery charters should have alternative status similar to that of the State's Approved Alternative Programs if they can demonstrate that at least 75% of their students meet criteria set forth in the Graduation Incentives Program under Minnesota statute 124D.68. 75% is the same percentage required by the state of California's Alternative Schools Accountability Model, which includes charter schools.

This new classification would serve dropout recovery charter schools and the students they serve as well as vital public purposes. Minnesota has the highest achievement gap in the nation and one of the lowest African-American graduation rates. Dropout prevention/recovery charters have been created to be part of the solution to this problem, and current evaluation systems unfairly threaten this type of program. Shutting down or pejoratively labeling dropout prevention programs indiscriminately due to the application of inappropriate data measures throttles the public purpose of increasing achievement and graduation rates. The innovation that charters provide needs to be a critical component of Minnesota's efforts to serve high-needs students.

This new classification would also provide a pilot for developing effective practices. New methods of evaluation would be established. Best practices for serving highly mobile, at-risk students could be identified, developed and shared. Minnesota could be seen as a nationwide leader in creating and applying innovative techniques to address the dropout problem and the achievement gap through its already respected system of charter schools.

Creating a class of dropout recovery charters could also benefit the state in that Minnesota could evaluate other charter schools differently from dropout recovery charters, thus making each evaluation more focused and appropriate.¹ Current research shows that data needs to dig more deeply into the complex problems faced in our schools. Our state needs to be on the cutting edge of this incipient movement toward greater complexity and systems-based thinking. Minnesota could highlight its high-quality dropout recovery schools as examples for the country, reestablishing the state as a leader in dealing with at-risk populations.

A new category for charters serving at-risk students (MN statute 124D.68), will address high-need students and ensure that ALL Minnesota charter schools reach their potential as high quality.

ⁱ Researchers at Northwestern University, in "Complex Systems View of Educational Policy Research," assert that, "Education researchers have struggled for decades with questions such as 'why are troubled schools so difficult to improve?' or 'why is the achievement gap so hard to close?' We argue here that conceptualizing schools and districts as complex adaptive systems, composed of many networked parts that give rise to emergent patterns through their interactions (1), holds promise for understanding such important problems. . . . (2), only recently have researchers begun to apply these tools to issues of educational policy." (Marsoulis et. al, 2010) NCLB data is only disaggregated to a minimal degree; considering other factors, according to researchers like those at Northwestern, will provide policy makers with more meaningful information and will result in more targeted solutions and interventions.
