



Public Charter Schools Help Dropouts Recover

According to estimates from the National Governors Association (NGA), nationally only 70% of high school students graduate on time with a regular diploma. Rates vary considerably across states and by ethnicity.¹ Many students who fail to complete their basic education are a significant cause of social problems, and drive up state expenses for welfare, remedial and judicial services.

Founders of many public charter schools choose to focus on students who have dropped out or who are at risk of dropping out of school. The first public charter school was started in St. Paul in 1992 as an alternative program for at-risk youth. By 2005, it was estimated that 80 charter high schools focusing on at-risk students enrolled about 20,000 youth in 22 states, and had succeeded in attracting back many students who had previously dropped out.²

Here are a few examples:

- ♦ In California, the **Options for Youth Public Charter School** is the state's largest dropout recovery program. Since 1999 the program has graduated or returned 41,000 middle and high school students to public education.³
- ♦ In Florida, the **Alee Academy Alternative Charter School** recruits students who have dropped out. Their program offers individual attention, vocational training in a local "eatery" run by students, service learning and partnerships with local organizations. Since 1999, the program has "noticeably contributed to the reduction in the high school dropout rate in the Lake City School District."⁴
- ♦ **YouthBuild USA** operates programs for youth ages 16-24 who have dropped out of high school. Programs train low-income youth in construction trades while helping them obtain a GED or HS diploma. About one-third of the 226 YouthBuild programs around the country are public charter schools. Those offering the GED are being encouraged to transition to offering regular HS diplomas. Since 1994, YouthBuild estimates that 76,000 youth have participated in their programs.⁵

A major report in 2006 highlights the voices of youths who have dropped out of school, and suggests the kinds of changes that might have made a difference for them: **The Silent Epidemic - Perspectives of High School Dropouts**.⁶ Many alternative public schools and public chartered schools use these recommendations to address the needs of students at-risk of dropping out of school.

Maine state data over 10 years shows average graduation rates of about 76% , which represents about 8000 dropouts per 4-year cohort. Education Commissioner Gendron admits that the official numbers on the website are higher than independent estimates.⁷ Many of the alternative public schools in Maine still have waiting lists. Many districts do not have any available public alternative education programs at all. And too often, such programs have limited funding or are stigmatized - both at the school and student level - as being for the "bad" kids.

With so few affordable options for our at-risk population, Maine needs a complementary schooling option for non-traditional learners.⁸ With current poor economic conditions creating additional risk for families and students, Maine communities are probably going to experience an increased dropout rate. Encouraging charter school options will bring new federal funds (not available to traditional Maine SAUs) to support alternative programs in public charter schools.

Notes:

1. "Implementing Graduation Counts: State Progress to Date, 2008," National Governors Association, Education Division, www.nga.org.
2. "Charter High Schools Target the Dropout Epidemic," Shaka Mitchell, Center for Education Reform, 2.11.05, p.2.
3. "41,000 & Counting: Options for Youth Public Charter School's Announce Dropout Prevention Milestone." Article from <http://reuters.com>, 3/4/09. FMI see www.ofy.org.
4. From the National Dropout Prevention Center, <http://ndpc-web.clemson.edu/modelprograms>; www.aleeacademy.org.
5. National School Initiative, YouthBuild USA, www.youthbuild.org, 3/24/09.
6. The Silent Epidemic - Perspectives of High School Dropouts, John M. Bridgeland, John J. DiIulio, Jr., and Karen Burke Morison, March 2006. A report by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Available at www.educationevolving.org.
7. "High School Graduation Rates Inflated," Victoria Wallack, July 6, 2006, www.villagesoup.com.
8. "The Progress of Education Reform - Dropout Prevention," Jennifer Dounay, Education Commission of the States, Vol. 8 #1, July 2007, www.ecs.org;
"Staying In!! - Students Reinforce Case for Fundamentally Different Schools," Education Evolving, April 2007, www.educationevolving.org; also see the National Dropout Prevention Center, www.dropoutprevention.org.