

**Alternative Education Programs Committee
To Review Existing Alternative Education Programs**

Meeting Summary – October 31, 2007

Members Present: James Artesani, Chris Bean, Sen. Bowman, Pender Makin, Sen. Mills, Rep. Norton, Emanuel Pariser, Shelley Reed, Rep. Robinson, Jonathan Ross

1. Welcome and introductions.

Sen. Bowman, Senate Chair of the Committee, convened the meeting and called it to order. Committee members introduced themselves. Committee staff reviewed the purpose, duties and other provisions of Resolve 2007, chapter 124 that created the Committee.

Sen. Bowman stressed the need to pick targets given the wide-ranging duties of the resolve. The Committee worked to identify the focus of the study and determine necessary data and presentations for future meetings.

2. Dept of Education, Office of Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education survey.

Shelley Reed is conducting a survey of alternative education programs – where they are, who they serve, program focus, students going on to college. Also questions on pregnancy and homelessness. The survey has been sent out and she is hopeful that the results of the survey will be available to the Committee by the next meeting on November 27.

The survey expects to provide data to satisfy the duties of the number and types of K-12 alternative programs in the state; determine the number of students in programs; how the programs help in raising graduation rates and lowering dropout rates; percentage of youth identified as at risk but completed high school through participation in an alternative education program; and identify the geographic regions in which students do not have access to alternative education programs.

Committee members are interested in the geographical presentation of alternative education programs and would like to see a map version of the programs after the survey is completed.

Sen. Mills asked if programs like Jobs for Maine Graduates (JMG) are counted as alternative education programs. Shelley Reed stated that alternative education by definition needs to be part of existing program in elementary or secondary schools. Although programs such as Future Builders and JMG serve the same kind of students as alternative education programs, they do not meet the definition because they are private or quasi-private. Rob Schulz, South Region Manager of JMG was present at the meeting.

Mr. Schulz stated that JMG has over 50 programs and Lewiston School District is their largest customer using JMG as their alternative education program.

3. Learning Results and chapter 127.

Several members of the Committee were concerned about the recent changes in Learning Results and expected changes in chapter 127 (graduation requirements). Many programs are very small – only one person in a school – and may be physically disconnected from the school. A major concern is that students in alternative education programs must be able to access a high school diploma. Another major concern is that increasing graduation requirements will result in more students in danger of dropping out of school altogether. Jonathan Ross mentioned that the Truancy, Dropout and Alternative Education Committee had expressed its concern about graduation requirements to Commissioner Gendron in a letter. [This letter has been provided to the Committee.]

The Committee requested a short presentation on changes in Learning Results and graduation requirements from the Department of Education. This has been scheduled.

4. Adult education.

Discussion among committee members identified adult education as an area that should be focused on. A large number of students aged 16 to 20 years are enrolled in adult education classes. Jonathan Ross explained that local adult education is derived from three sources: state subsidies based on a two year old budget; revenue through courses; and city or town local funds. Most adult education programs include GED, high school diploma and enrichment (some only have enrichment). Under the old model, the student dropped out and then took adult education classes. Now the students are often caught early enough that they do not need to drop out. However, the funding for adult education is one-tenth of a regular student even though for these students, adult education is really alternative education. Rep. Norton commented that shifting funds to adult education means shifting it away from something else. The Committee requested a presentation from Jim Rier's office on this issue. Jonathan Ross will provide reimbursement rates per course.

5. Funding.

Funding in the broader sense was identified by all members of the Committee as a concern and necessary focus. Jonathan Ross noted that his superintendent would like funding for alternative education to be comparable to special education. Sen. Mills commented that there is a temptation for a third tier in addition to mainstreamed and special education students because alternative education programs require smaller classes. Rep. Norton stated that many alternative education students qualify for free or reduced lunch increasing the funding that those students.

Emanuel Pariser argued that alternative education programs should be framed as an economic development issue since these are students that usually stay in Maine.

Pender Makin commented that it would be useful to look at the cost of dropouts to the community. Rob Schulz from the Jobs for Maine Graduates offered to provide the Working Maine report from the Maine Dept of Labor which examined earnings levels of graduates that stayed in Maine. Dr Artesani stated that funding should be flexible and responsive and have a needs-based perspective.

Several members of the Committee raised the issue of federal funding and expressed frustration that they would hear about funding for dropout prevention but it never seemed to be available.

6. Discussion of “at risk” versus all alternatives.

Staff requested feedback from Committee members on priorities for focus. The duties of the Resolve specify “youth at risk in Maine”. Rep. Muse indicated that she would like to see the study include all alternatives within the public sector (e.g. theme schools such as an art school). Emanuel Pariser suggested he would like the study to focus on kids in trouble however this is defined. Jonathan Ross also advocated for “at risk”, stating that special education does not pick up the “ghost in the hallway” but effective alternative education can. Chris Bean suggested that “universal design”, from an architectural point of view, could be used to show how all groups – at risk, pregnant, Asperger’s etc – could benefit. As an easy example for illustration, he used a bathroom with access for the disabled – available and useful to all. Pender Makin suggested that focusing on those unsuccessful in the traditional school setting would include genius kids that are disaffected as well. The Committee also discussed whether teen parents would be a focus for the group. Real School has a number of pregnant teens referred and a flexible schedule is necessary to meet the needs for those students. Pregnancy is one of the questions on Shelley Reed’s survey.

7. Consolidation.

Committee members noted that the impact of consolidation on the ability to deliver services is not yet known. Small districts may be unable to provide certain alternative education programs but larger consolidated districts may be able to do this.

8. Training.

Professional development and training was raised as a possible focus for the Committee. Dr Artesani informed the Committee that the University of Maine at Orono was in the process of organizing a graduate concentration in alternative education and getting it approved. The University is also looking at different delivery options for courses to achieve more outreach. The Committee was encouraged by this development.

Several members of the Committee commented that all students take a class on “exceptionality”, which is largely a special education class that includes only 40 minutes in the entire course for alternative education. Dr Artesani stated that there is a

tremendous amount of competition for adding courses to the curriculum and that it is more important to add material on alternative education to all courses.

9. Anecdotes.

One of the duties of the resolve is to provide anecdotal evidence regarding the impact of alternative education on people's lives. Chris Bean offered to bring stories and the Committee determined they would be an appendix in the final report.

10. Presentations and requests for information for the next meeting.

The Committee discussed the possibility of moving the meeting to November 16, but decided to stick to the original schedule of November 27 particularly because it wanted to allow the maximum amount of time for Shelley Reed to organize her survey results.

- Presentation on Learning Results and Chapter 127 (Anita Bernhardt).
- Presentation by Jim Rier on funding alternatives with particular attention to adult education.
- Reimbursement rates for adult education courses (Jonathan Ross).
- Overview of funding from other states (contacted the Education Commission of the States and possibly some information from UMO).
- Information on LD 1640, An Act to Permit Charter Schools in Maine, from the 122nd Legislature.

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