

Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs Position Paper on 'Adequate Yearly Progress' (AYP)

As the mission of the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs is: to lead, promote and support innovative learning experiences, we oppose the State of Minnesota's process for identifying under-performing schools for not meeting 'Adequate Yearly Progress'.

Alternative programs exist to offer an educational option to students who have not met with success in the traditional school environment and therefore, we believe in a system of continuous improvement that reflects the beliefs, values and practices of our programs. Just as we opposed 'high stakes tests' in a previous position paper because of its 'unintended consequences damaging to schools and students,' we must oppose this practice for much the same reasoning.

To quote our findings:

MAAP schools will be among the first to be labeled under-performing not because of deficiencies in the quality of the program but because we correct massive failures in the education of our students as they come to us. After many years of conventional education most students arrive in our programs well behind in academic performance, negative about schooling, and sometimes with belligerent or defeatist attitudes. No program corrects such deficiencies overnight. Schools serving the most troubled students should not be devastated by pejorative terms such as "under-performing" or "needs remediation" or should be "reconstituted." Labeling our schools will be unproductive and unfair. (Adopted by MAAP Board of Directors, January 2003)

As alternative educators, we believe:

- No child should be left behind and that all students can learn.
- Students should be challenged to reach their full potential.
- Schools are accountable for results.
- Student needs set the agenda for learning success, not schools.
- Learning is an individual process, not a standardized end point.
- Schools must nurture healthy relationships.

We believe that the system set in place for NCLB and AYP was designed with good intentions, BUT will have the opposite effect on students because it:

- Singles out schools based on measures that do not accurately determine their success or failure. This is unfair and a disservice to students and the public.
- Does not recognize the 'choice' nature of our programs, which we believe is essential to reversing the 'throwaway' perception many of our students must battle against.
- Is a shame-based system that operates on punishment rather than improvement and focuses on and perpetuates the label of "failure" that has impeded the growth of so many students and wrongly defines the programs that offer them another opportunity to get on a success path.
- Does not take into consideration the complexity of educating INDIVIDUALS who come to school with unique backgrounds and needs, and of necessity will measure their success on a different time line than students in a traditional and compulsory system. (For example, many students choose alternative programs because it allows them to attend part-time while they work or care for dependent children.)
- Requires educators' energy and resources to be channeled to activities not germane to student's life and learning needs.
- Causes schools to push out students, who because of absences or lack of credit may cause that school to be on "the list". In some cases denying students access to the school of their choice.
- Causes anxiety and despair on the part of students and parents who find their school may rightly or wrongly be identified as a failing school.

- Distracts districts from addressing the individual and unique needs of the students and the problems schools may have in reaching the unmeasured student goals for responsible citizenship, productive workmanship and capacity for life long learning.
- Will, when added to a system of high-stake testing and exit exams, further limit the ability of alternative programs to be student centered and utilize a variety of methods and practices that have proven to help students succeed and meet the goals of our programs.

We commit ourselves to the development of appropriate and proactive multiple measures for our programs to identify areas of improvement and proven methods to remedy deficiencies and improve upon successes.

Alternative schools reflect our democratic society. All around the country, implementing NCLB has been a messy and complex process with many errors and a great deal of unnecessary anger and confusion. The intrusion of cumbersome and bureaucratic rules strangles initiative and will stifle the very innovations that have made our programs successful. NCLB with the AYP process for identifying under-performing schools is doomed to fail both schools and students. It must be changed to respect and empower schools to ensure that **no child is left behind**.

[The Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs is a 1000 member association of Minnesota educators and friends, and is a charter member of the International Association for Learning Alternatives. Through our work with other states across this country we recognize this is a national problem and encourage others to join our efforts.]