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Our Piece of the Pie®, Inc. (OPP®)
Testimony to the Connecticut General Assembly – Appropriations Committee
on Senate Bill 24
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Ashley is 18-years old. Based on her success today, you would never know that she was once a high school dropout.

Just a couple of years ago, Ashley became disconnected from school and stopped attending. She spent a year on the streets of Hartford with fellow dropouts, watching the gap widen between her friends who had stayed in school and those who had dropped out.

Ashley didn't like the feeling that her friends in school were passing her by, but she couldn't see a way to make the traditional high school setting work. This was when she turned to OPP for help. After OPP helped her to carefully consider her future, Ashley decided to re-enroll in school – this time at Opportunity High School (OHS), which gives youth who have dropped out of other high schools a second chance to earn a diploma.

At OHS, she has the daily support of committed teachers and support staff, like her Youth Development Specialist, to help her get through the rigorous academic curriculum of the Hartford Public School system and prepare for college and career. Now, Ashley is in her final year at OHS, and has a plan for her future. She is excited about her studies and plans to go to college to study in the field of nursing. To Ashley, OHS isn't just another high school; it's the place where people believe in her and allow her to believe in herself.

This success story is just one of many that have come out of Our Piece of the Pie (OPP) and Opportunity High School (OHS). As a youth development agency, OPP serves over a thousand struggling urban youth just like Ashley every year, helping them to get through high school and on to post-secondary programs and fulfilling careers. Our partnership high school with Hartford Public Schools (HPS), OHS, has allowed us to bring this focus into the school system, specifically serving over-age, under-credit students and previous high school dropouts. The purpose of OHS is to provide an alternative learning environment for these youth, so that they may have a second chance to achieve success. We do this by combining the rigorous HPS curriculum with the best elements of the youth development, academic support, and workforce readiness fields – a program that we call Pathways to Success. This approach has paid off, as seen by the impressive results achieved by OHS students. Just one example of this is the fact that last year, 95% of OHS students earned more credits than they had in their previous year of high school (before coming to OHS).

OHS serves a crucial function in Hartford but, with an estimated 30-40,000 OU youth across Connecticut, there must be a greater statewide focus on these high need students. Not only is our education system failing these individual youth, but it is failing the state and its economy as a whole. A recent commissioned study by Dr. Andrew Sum of Northeastern University estimates that, on average, every high school dropout in Connecticut costs the state more than \$500,000 over his/her working lifetime. With these enormous costs, we cannot afford to underserve our

students any longer. **S.B. 24 takes important steps toward ensuring that we will provide the right supports and programs for high need students to achieve success across the state.**

For too long, the traditional school model has assumed that academic performance should remain separate from other issues facing our high need and at-risk youth. However, as research across the country has shown, schools must offer whole person supports, particularly for our highest need students. **S.B. 24 provides an opening for this new facet of school models by requiring that conditional funding grantees coordinate with providers to ensure that students receive adequate support and wraparound services.** This mandate aligns closely with the OHS partnership model, which has demonstrated success over its nearly three years of operation. Even better, the bill makes an important recognition of youth service providers' abilities to enhance student achievement, through its proposal to allow non-profits (among other organizations) to run schools within the Commissioner's Network. These components of S.B. 24 open the door for proven programs like OPP to help school districts make a difference for their students.

While these proposals aimed at high need schools and districts are an excellent start, the state must maintain an even sharper focus on the highest need subsets of students in these areas. Historically, there have been few avenues through which to serve these students in Connecticut, which has not been home to an overwhelming number of high quality alternative education programs. Charters and other public choice schools can often be a great innovation space for truly alternative academic models, yet Connecticut has routinely put up roadblocks to scaling up these successful learning environments statewide, particularly restricting them through limited funding. This is a detriment to achievement for all students, but particularly for our state's highest need students, who most need high quality alternative models and options. (Please see our attached issue brief detailing the importance of offering appropriate alternative education environments to our state's struggling students, including OU youth.)

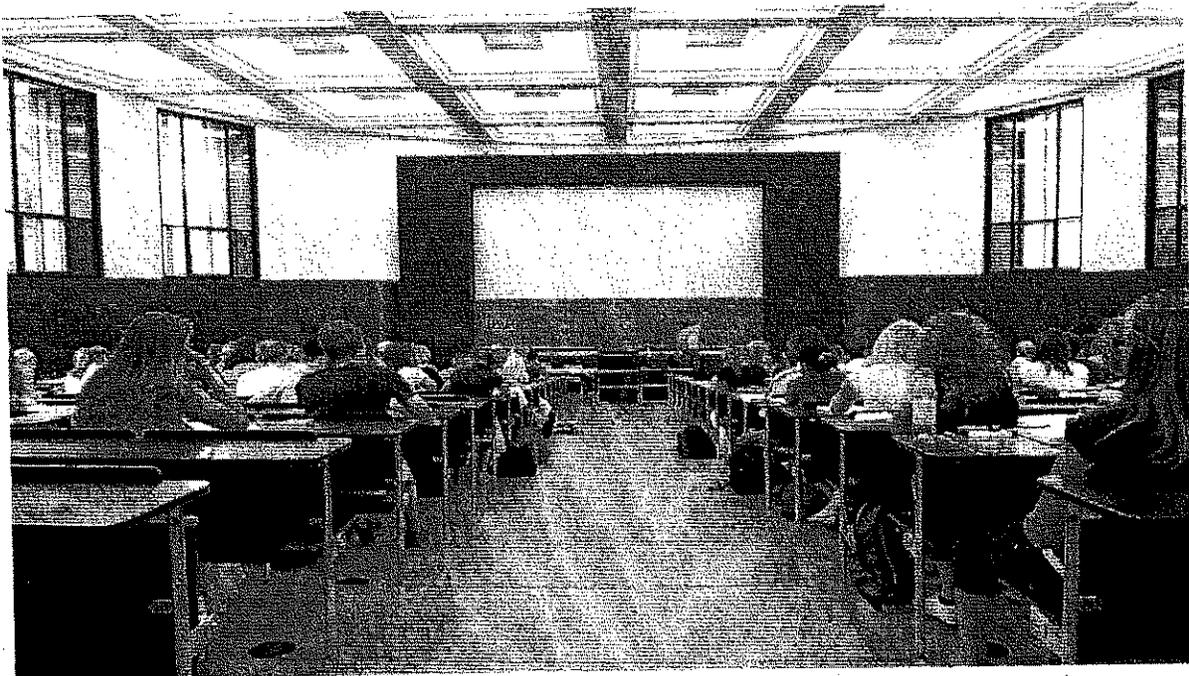
However, S.B. 24 takes enormous strides toward fixing many of these issues, ensuring that high quality service providers can open and operate these types of schools to improve student achievement across the state. Proposals creating capacity to open new community, CommPACT, and local/state charter schools will give service providers room to open new programs. **In addition, increases in funding to all types of public choice schools will help them to fund truly alternative models, aimed at improving student achievement. In particular, the bill's proposal to engage local districts in state charter operations will mean not only financial support for these schools, but a true partnership in which the districts have a stake in the school and its students.**

Perhaps most importantly, S.B. 24 also provides specific support for the state's highest need students. It explicitly directs preference to charter applicants who have plans to serve high need student populations. But even more than this, it offers charter operators lottery waivers, so that they may specifically select students from high need groups, including students with a history of low academic performance (such as OU youth). This proposal would allow service providers like OPP to focus exclusively on some of the state's highest need students, who could benefit the most from a high quality alternative school model. We have shown through Opportunity High School that these alternative approaches can work, even with students who face deep challenges

– and we and other organizations like ours are ready to partner with the state and district to open new options to meet the needs of all students.

These proposals create a foundation on which to begin to equitably educate all of Connecticut's students. The Governor's bold strides toward education reform are clear in these ambitious proposals, but if we truly want to serve all of Connecticut's students at the highest possible level, there are ways to further strengthen S.B. 24. In particular, **OPP recommends that S.B. 24 go further than the minor tweaks to ECS formula measures. While increased funding to public choice schools will help, their exclusion from the formula will still leave these schools with uncertainty every year, as they fight for line item appropriations in the state budget.** Connecticut must fix the ECS formula in order to equitably and effectively fund student needs across the state. In addition, this formula must include funding weights for OU youth, like those given for ELL and special needs students. OU students require additional supports, including opportunities for credit recovery and acceleration (e.g. extended school day/year), and are therefore more costly to educate. OPP has successfully achieved this recuperative weight in Hartford for our OHS students, and it has proven to be a key funding strategy to educate our target population.

Connecticut cannot afford to continue stalling on important education reforms, particularly those aimed at our state's highest need students. **With every high school dropout costing the state over \$500,000 over his/her working lifetime, we must do everything possible to ensure student achievement in our schools.** This means giving all of our students appropriate learning environments – not just removing those who are not succeeding and sending them to Adult Education or low quality alternative programs, an issue detailed in our attached report. Every Connecticut youth deserves an education that adequately prepares them for the life ahead. **We at OPP can see that S.B. 24 provides a critical foundation for this to happen, and strongly urge the Appropriations Committee to support its reform measures in their entirety.**



The Rise of High School Dropouts in Adult Education:

Making the Case for Raising the Compulsory School Attendance Age and Expanding Alternative Education Options in Connecticut

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Our Piece of the Pie®

Executive Summary

The following report highlights the issues facing high school dropouts in Connecticut and nationwide, as well as the policy measures that will result in improved student success.

The Problem

- Over 7,000 U.S. high school students drop out each day, costing the U.S. economy approximately \$7.6 billion in potential annual earnings. In Connecticut, approximately 9,000 students dropped out of school in 2011. Each student costs the state an estimated \$517,893 (compared to a high school graduate) over his/her lifetime, in lost fiscal contributions and increased costs associated with more severe health issues and higher incarceration rates, among others.
- Dropouts share a number of common risk factors. They are often low-income, urban youth minorities that experience academic challenges, problematic behaviors, and difficult life events. Many potential dropouts do not have the appropriate number of credits for their age and intended grade.
- Dropouts often turn to Adult Education to earn a secondary education credential such as a GED. In Adult Education, young dropouts do not receive the specialized services they require, and they prevent Adult Education programs from serving their target population.
- Students underestimate both the difficulty of passing the GED test and the value of the credential to potential employers. Many students fail to complete the GED credential and those who do earn significantly less than high school graduates.

The Solution

- The Connecticut General Statutes allow a student to withdraw from school if he or she is 17 years of age or older. This is an outdated policy that results in many students dropping out and turning to Adult Education. To discourage dropouts, the compulsory school attendance age should be raised to 18.
- Alternative education options that provide recuperative education strategies, individualized attention, support services, and college and career preparation should be properly funded and encouraged to expand. Adult education programs should not be considered appropriate alternative education options.
- By providing appropriate alternative education options, the state will help position Connecticut's at-risk and struggling youth for future success and contribution to the labor market and community.

The Problem

High school students across the United States are dropping out of school at an alarming rate. Each day, over 7,000 students drop out. In 2010 alone, approximately 1.3 million students nationwide failed to graduate with their class.¹ Of Americans between the ages of 16 and 24, an estimated 3.5 to 6 million are dropouts.² The financial implications of these dropout rates are severe. High school graduates earn approximately 43% more than those who drop out, and individuals with a college degree earn 150% more than dropouts. In addition, unemployment rates among dropouts are 65% higher than among high school graduates.³

In addition to facing a bleak financial future, dropouts fail to address the rising need for educated workers in the United States. Over the next decade, the portion of jobs requiring some postsecondary education is expected to rise from around 56% to 63%. To reach this level of educational attainment, the US will have to produce 22 million college graduates by 2018. We are currently projected to fall short of this goal by at least 3 million graduates.⁴ In a nation where two-thirds of jobs categorized as high-wage or high-growth require a college degree, we are desperate to increase high school, and subsequently college, graduation rates.⁵

High school dropouts also have a severe impact on the economy and public expenditure. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, reducing the 2010 national high school dropout rate by half would generate an additional \$7.6 billion in annual earnings by new graduates. These earnings would lead to increased spending and investment that would subsequently support approximately 54,000 new jobs.⁶

These issues are felt around the country, particularly in Connecticut, the state that is home to the worst achievement gap in the nation between poor students and their wealthier peers.⁷ In Connecticut, approximately 22% of students leave high school each year without a diploma. In 2011 alone, about 9,000 students dropped out of Connecticut schools.⁸ If these students were to remain in school and graduate, they would have a dramatic impact on their future success. The lifetime difference in net fiscal contributions between a Connecticut high school graduate and a high school dropout is \$517,893. This is an alarming gap that is \$212,581 higher in Connecticut than on average in the other 50 states.⁹

If just half of the estimated 10,000 Connecticut 2010 dropouts graduated, they would generate an additional \$64 million each year. These earnings would lead to increased spending of \$45 million, resulting in an estimated 300 new jobs.¹⁰ In addition to losing significant economic benefits for the state, each class of dropouts costs Connecticut approximately \$155.4 million in additional lifetime healthcare costs.¹¹ Dropouts also cost the state an average of \$1,721 per year in institutionalization costs. This is 3 times higher than the costs related to high school graduates, and 47 times higher than costs related to college graduates.¹²

Why Students Drop Out

A disproportionate number of low-income, urban youth minorities do not complete high school in the United States. While the national graduation rate hovers between 68% and 71%, African American and Hispanic students graduate at a rate of approximately 50%. The severity of the dropout problem within these minority groups is evident when contrasted with graduation rates for white and Asian students. Between 75% and 77% of these populations successfully graduate from high school. In addition, male students tend to have more difficulty completing school, with female students graduating at slightly higher rates.¹³

More than half of the dropouts in the United States come from approximately 2,000 high schools that have been identified as "dropout factories." These high schools fail to graduate over 60% of students that enroll as freshmen. While just 30% of white student dropouts are attributed to a "dropout factory", 69% of all African American dropouts and 63% of all Hispanic dropouts in the United States attended one of these schools.¹⁴ These ineffective schools can be found in about 50 large cities across 15 states, primarily located in the south and southwest.¹⁵

Research has shown that students' reasons for dropping out can be categorized into four main (often interconnected) areas: academic failure; disinterest in school resulting in poor attendance; problematic behavior; and life events such as pregnancy or family issues.¹⁶ While some students drop out because of significant academic difficulties, a large portion of students drop out due to complex life circumstances and inadequate assistance from school systems. In a recent survey, 32% of students said they dropped out because they needed to make money, 26% dropped out because they became a parent, and 22% dropped out to care for a family member.¹⁷

Overall, this data shows that at-risk students, in terms of socioeconomic background and other common risk factors, are highly likely to drop out of high school. Over-age, under-credit (OU) youth possess another common risk factor associated with high school dropouts. These students do not have the appropriate number of credits for their age and intended grade. In Connecticut, the number of OU youth is estimated to be between 30,000 and 40,000 students.¹⁸ These students often become disengaged from traditional high school models and drop out.

Adult Education

After dropping out, a large number of students turn to adult education programs as a means to complete their secondary education. Connecticut law requires local school districts to provide adult education services free of charge to any adult, 17 or older, not enrolled in public school. Adult education services offered in Connecticut include, Elementary School Completion, Secondary School Completion, General Education Development (GED), Adult High School Credit Diploma, Citizenship, and English as a Second Language. In the 2010 academic school year, the State of Connecticut spent

\$44,322,719 in state, local, and federal funds to provide adult education services to 30,889 individuals across 350 program sites.¹⁹

Connecticut's adult education programs served 5,056 students in 2010 between the ages of 16 and 18. This age group accounted for 16% of all enrolled students. Another 4,492 students, over 14% of those served, were between the ages of 19 and 21. Together, students between the ages of 16 and 21 made up over 30% of all students served. These demographic characteristics have remained relatively constant since 2006.²⁰ This group of 16-21 year old students has a legal right to a public high school education in the state of Connecticut. All of these students (particularly the 16-18 year olds) should have the opportunity to complete their high school education in a traditional or alternative learning environment, rather than being forced into Adult Education. These programs provide high school equivalency degrees which have been shown to be less valuable than a high school diploma, and are not equipped to handle the at-risk students who often come to them with more academic challenges.

Unfortunately, this influx of recent high school dropouts is problematic for adult education programs. These programs are not well-equipped to deal with the academic and behavioral challenges that often accompany recent high school dropouts.²¹ Youth that have difficulty succeeding in more traditional high schools, where resources such as special education, guidance counselors, and social workers are available, experience additional problems in adult education where they are expected to be motivated, mature, and succeed without access to other resources.²² Adult education programs are designed for older, more mature students, who do not have the behavioral and academic issues that many young dropouts face. Bringing these problems to Adult Education puts additional strain on an already taxed system and impacts program directors as well as older, adult students. Further, adult education programs do not receive the weighted funding required to handle the disproportionate number of special needs students within the high school dropout population.²³ In fact, traditional high schools and alternative education programs currently produce better outcomes for these students and are better equipped to deal with their many challenges.²⁴

The GED

Many recent high school dropouts enroll in adult education programs to pursue a GED. In fact, 63% of dropouts earn their diploma or GED within 8 years of leaving high school.²⁵ Adult Education is the largest program to promote and subsidize the GED. In 1975, adult education programs were responsible for 26% of GEDs awarded. By 1980, this number had increased to 40% and has continued to rise, reaching 50% by 1990. There has been substantial growth overall in the number of GED certificates issued. As of 2007, of all high school credentials issued, 12% were GEDs. This rise in GED certification, from approximately 2% of high school credentials issued in 1955 to 12% in 2007 is due, in part, to students overestimating the usefulness of the GED credential.²⁶

Research has shown that students who earn their GED do not increase their wage earning potential and are less successful in obtaining a job than their high school graduate counterparts.²⁷ In fact, there is a significant gap between the earnings of an individual who receives a high school diploma, and one who receives a GED. Individuals with high school diplomas achieve higher rates of employment and better labor market outcomes than GED recipients. Even students that take more than four years to complete high school are more likely to graduate from college and maintain full-time employment than GED recipients.²⁸ When considering wage income, hourly wage, and hours worked, there is a clear benefit to a high school diploma over a GED.²⁹

In addition to overestimating the value of the GED, many students view the credential as a way to exert less academic effort. 40% of high school dropouts surveyed by the National Center for Educational Statistics said they considered the ease of getting a GED during their decision to drop out of school. While research has shown that passing the GED does require significantly less effort than completing high school, the difficulty of the GED test and a student's chances of passing are often underestimated by dropouts.³⁰

When the GED was first introduced to civilians in the 1940s, an estimated 80% of students were able to pass the test on their first try. Since then, test difficulty has increased dramatically, resulting in a success rate of 60% for students taking the exam for the first time.³¹ As a result, a large number of students who enroll in Adult Education do not complete the credential. The phenomenon of "double dropout" describes the tendency of 16- to 20-years-olds to drop out of both high school and Adult Education.³² For example, of the 526 New Haven students age 16 to 18 that enrolled in Adult Education in 2009, just 118 completed their education.³³ Whether due to school failure, family or personal problems, peer pressure, or other issues, dropping out of high school to enroll in Adult Education is not the best option for Connecticut youth.³⁴

The Solution

Raising the Compulsory School Attendance Age

In a 2009 Special Session, the Connecticut legislature passed Senate Bill 2053, which raised the age at which a parent may consent to a child's withdrawal from school from 16 to 17, as of July 1, 2011.³⁵ While this was a step in the right direction, Connecticut, like many other states, still has an outdated compulsory school attendance policy that allow students to leave high school prior to the age of majority. The bulk of these compulsory attendance laws were implemented in the late 1800s and early 1900s when the nation was largely agrarian and a high school diploma was not a necessity. Today, even a high school diploma is not enough to succeed in a globally competitive environment. Allowing students to drop out of school at a young age leaves them stranded, unable to obtain their diploma, gain access to college, and achieve career success.³⁶

Increasing the school withdrawal age in Connecticut to 18 will help a greater number of students remain in school and experience the benefits that come with a high school diploma. House Bill 6585, introduced to the state legislature last session, mandates that a student must remain in school until he or she completes high school or turns 18. Should this bill pass in the upcoming session, it will decrease the number of 16- to 18-year-olds that enroll in Adult Education programs, and could potentially increase the number of students graduating with a high school diploma (rather than a GED), generating significant economic and social returns for the state.³⁷

A number of states have implemented laws increasing the compulsory school attendance age to 18 including Indiana, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Nevada, New Mexico and several others.³⁸ While research surrounding the impact of increasing the student dropout age remains inconclusive, compulsory attendance laws have been shown in some studies to encourage approximately one-quarter of potential high school dropouts to stay in school.³⁹

Because of the inconclusive nature of this research however, it is important to recognize that increasing the compulsory school attendance age is part of a broader solution. Many states have recognized this and paired compulsory attendance legislation with other education reform efforts. Connecticut should follow this lead and create an array of innovative education options for students that find it difficult to succeed in a traditional high school setting. These alternative education options will help students like OU youth to get back on track. By fostering a climate in Connecticut where alternative education options are available, all students will have access to the quality education they deserve.

Alternative High School Education

Alternative education programs provide unique options for students who have trouble succeeding within a traditional school setting. The content of these programs varies significantly, but most help students get back on track with recuperative education

strategies, individualized attention, intensive support services, and college and career preparation. The importance of these types of alternative education options cannot be understated. To address the various aspects of the dropout dilemma, it is important to review Connecticut's alternative education policy and allow for the development of creative educational options.⁴⁰

Alternative education programs are especially critical in light of recently passed legislation allowing expelled students, 16 and over, to utilize adult education as an alternative education option. In July 2011, House Bill 6433 was signed into law, allowing students expelled from traditional school settings to participate in adult education programs without being required to withdraw from school.⁴¹ As discussed previously, adult education is not the proper learning environment for these young students. By allowing students who experience behavioral and academic difficulties to enroll in adult education programs, rather than providing them with the alternative education options they require, Connecticut is short changing students that are at the highest risk of dropping out.

Alternative education programs face a number of other challenges. One barrier to getting OU students back on track is the amount of time students are required to spend in the classroom. Traditionally, grade-to-grade promotion is based on classroom time, rather than on content mastery. These "seat-time" requirements do not allow youth to acquire credits without re-taking entire courses. The long credit recovery process often discourages youth who must repeat an entire failed class, despite having mastered a portion of course content. To overcome this barrier, alternative education programs should include flexible credit recovery options based on demonstrated content mastery, not time spent in the classroom.⁴²

Funding is another barrier to successful alternative education programs. Helping students who have dropped out of school to get back on track is an expensive and time consuming undertaking. Unfortunately, programs are limited by state educational funding barriers where there is little flexibility when it comes to allowing funds to follow students where they are being served.⁴³ Having access to these funds is critical to alternative programs so they can address the many needs of dropouts by providing the specialized attention students need to get back on track.

Minnesota: A Case Study

Alternative education is becoming an increasingly important issue across the country. Since the year 2000, new legislation related to alternative education programs has been passed in 40 states.⁴⁴ Jobs for the Future (JFF) identified seven policy areas essential for the successful implementation and improvement of alternative education for dropouts and struggling students. These areas include: broad eligibility, clarified state and district roles, strengthened results accountability, innovation support, high-quality staff, student support services, and funding reform. While no state has adopted all seven recommended measures, Minnesota is one of two states that have met five of the seven recommended criteria.⁴⁵

Alternative education in Minnesota is aimed at a broad range of high-risk students including those that earn low test scores, are under-credit, expelled, using drugs, pregnant or parenting. Classes are small and utilize active, hands-on learning approaches. While enrolled in alternative education programs, students have access to resources that can assist with any social, emotional, or special needs they may experience.⁴⁶ In fact, in the 2009-2010 school year, 14% of students enrolled in Minnesota's alternative education programs received special education services.⁴⁷

Minnesota encourages and fosters innovation among alternative education programs through a network of over 150 alternative learning centers, alternative learning programs, and contract alternative schools. These programs have the autonomy to determine program structure as well as the method of education delivery. Collaboration within this large network of programs is encouraged, and funding is available up to 1.2 times the typical student funding amount.⁴⁸ This stands in stark contrast to the situation in Connecticut, where charter schools, the state's primary source of alternative education environments, are funded at approximately 75% of the average per pupil state funding amount.⁴⁹

Minnesota's alternative education programs have grown from serving 4,050 students in the 1988 -1989 school year to 158,289 students in the 2008-2009 school year.⁵⁰ A program evaluation conducted by the Minnesota Office of the Legislative Auditor found that, between 2008 and 2009, alternative education students receiving targeted kindergarten through eighth grade services increased test scores more than traditional students. While secondary students enrolled in alternative education had lower attendance and graduation rates than traditional students, 40% of these at-risk students improved attendance and 62% graduated when given additional time. Finally, alternative education high school students reported high levels of satisfaction. Approximately 75% of students said alternative education had met or exceeded their expectations. In addition, 70% of students felt their teachers cared about them, that they were being prepared for the future, and that they had accomplished what they wanted at their school.⁵¹ Minnesota's alternative education system provides an example of how to best serve at-risk youth so they can achieve academic success.

Connecticut should follow Minnesota's lead. Expanding and supporting alternative education programs will help dropouts acquire a high school diploma instead of relying on the GED. These measures will also alleviate pressure on the adult education system and allow it to serve the population it was designed to assist. Expanding alternative education opportunities will also have a positive effect on youth over the age of 18 who cannot be kept in high school by increasing the dropout age. Some of these students are at the highest risk of dropping out as they are frustrated with traditional high schools, are older than most students, and have been forced to repeat entire grades. By extending alternative options with competency-based approaches, these students can utilize the knowledge they have already acquired while simultaneously moving forward to complete their degree.

Conclusion

Adopting higher age requirements for compulsory school attendance and supporting alternative education options will help position Connecticut's at-risk and struggling youth for success. These policies will allow Adult Education programs to focus on their true target population, while offering school-aged youth appropriate alternative education environments and working to decrease high school dropout rates. Connecticut cannot afford to ignore solutions to the dropout problem. The importance of a high school diploma and the methods to improve graduation rates are well documented. It is crucial, now more than ever, that the state do away with outdated policies, allowing Connecticut to move forward and positively impact the lives of thousands of young people.

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