



January 2012 School Improvement Booster: Modified Allowable Growth for Dropout Prevention

The process of requesting plan approval and responding to DE rejection of dropout prevention plan activities is in full swing. The last day to resubmit an unapproved Returning Dropout/Dropout Prevention Program application is Feb. 1. In the last two years, DE oversight has expanded. This increase in oversight has occurred for two reasons; 1) several years ago, as a result of some questions regarding home school assistance programs, school districts were required to account for categorical funds separately and audits were to ensure money was spent as authorized by law and 2) access to new electronic information (unique student identifier associated with every student and the ability to compare financial data in each district's Certified Annual Report with the initial dropout prevention plan). Although school districts have been accustomed to more local flexibility, a look at the Iowa Code, in place for many years, shows how the program is designed to be more limited than many districts have practiced. **Iowa Code 257.40** describes the deadlines and the department's reporting requirements: **257.40 Approval of programs for returning dropouts and dropout prevention — annual report.**

1. The board of directors of a school district requesting to use modified allowable growth for programs for returning dropouts and dropout prevention shall submit requests for modified at-risk allowable growth, including budget costs, to the department not later than December 15 of the year preceding the budget year during which the program will be offered. The department shall review the request and shall prior to January 15 either grant approval for the request or return the request for approval with comments of the department included. An unapproved request for a program may be resubmitted with modifications to the department not later than February 1. Not later than February 15, the department shall notify the department of management and the school budget review committee of the names of the school districts for which programs using modified allowable growth for funding have been approved and the approved budget of each program listed separately for each school district having an approved request.

2. Beginning January 15, 2007, the department shall submit an annual report to the chairpersons and ranking members of the senate and house education committees that includes the ways school districts in the previous school year used modified allowable growth approved under subsection 1; identifies, by grade level, age, and district size, the students in the dropout and dropout prevention programs for which the department approves a request; describes school district progress toward increasing student achievement and attendance for the students in the programs; and describes how the school districts are using the revenues from the modified allowable growth to improve student achievement among minority subgroups.

Definitional Confusion

There is additional confusion due to different funding streams and programs in Iowa. School districts have at-risk funding, through their aid and levy worksheet, with greater spending flexibility. Many of us use the terms "at-risk" and "dropout prevention" interchangeably, which makes great sense in the real

world. There are many program references and definitions on the DE website that are great dropout prevention (such as early intervention or afterschool programming.) However, these great strategies also serve many students that don't meet the criteria in the law to qualify for receipt of the modified allowable growth for dropout prevention. These other programs that serve more students are worthy, just not eligible for this method of financing.

Legislation Proposed

[SF 451](#), approved by the Senate during the 2011 legislative session, is still in the House Education Committee. The DE will not grant any more flexibility than the law allows unless there is a change to the Iowa Code. The bill would allow at least some of the funding to target generic prevention activities. There is also a provision in the bill which would allow a school district to request, and the School Budget Review Committee (SBRC) to grant, additional modified allowable growth beyond the five percent limit. As a result of this section, some stakeholder groups at the statehouse oppose the legislation, since it expands property tax authority and may increase property taxes. At this point, the fate of this legislation is unknown. Additionally, the bill probably doesn't go far enough to grant the kind of flexibility that districts would prefer.

Program Expectations and Examples

The Jan. 2011 report, [Modified Allowable Growth for Dropout Prevention Annual Report](#), is posted on the DE web site. It provides examples of program descriptions, program focus, students served, and other elements of a district's dropout prevention plan. The Report describes the focus of the program as much narrower than generic prevention for any student at-risk. On page 3, the report states the purpose:

"Purpose for using MAG-DoP

Modified allowable growth for dropout prevention (MAG-DoP) is not funding that is generated to provide school wide programming to prevent students from becoming at-risk (preventing at-riskedness). It is intended to be used for serving students who left high school and have returned and to prevent those who are MOST at-risk from leaving school, completing school or progressing in school. When districts consider using this funding stream for programming, the district is asking the local property tax payers to invest in the district (as a community) so the students don't drop out and become a burden to state and local resources at a later point in life.

Funding for these programs must focus on two types of students, returning dropouts and potential dropouts as defined in Iowa Code Section 257.39:

"Returning dropouts" are resident pupils who have been enrolled in a public or nonpublic school in any of **grades seven through twelve** who withdrew from school for a reason other than transfer to another school or school district and who subsequently enrolled in a public school in the district.

"Potential dropouts" are resident pupils who are enrolled in a public or nonpublic school who demonstrate poor school adjustment as indicated by **two or more of the following**:

- a. High rate of absenteeism, truancy, or frequent tardiness.
- b. Limited or no extracurricular participation or lack of identification with school, including but not limited to, expressed feelings of not belonging.
- c. Poor grades, including but not limited to, failing in one or more school subjects or grade levels.
- d. Low achievement scores in reading or mathematics which reflects achievement at two years or more below grade level.

- e. Children in grades kindergarten through three who meet the definition of at-risk children adopted by the department of education.”

Looking for the Silver Lining:

There are some activities that the DE has approved as dropout prevention plan expenditures which can improve instruction and achievement for all students, such as focused professional development that is designed to help all educators in the system to:

- 1) better identify students at-risk and differentiate instruction, including assessment and data training specific to student achievement,
- 2) improve climate which directly addresses issues of connection to school (such as positive behavioral supports)
- 3) efforts to improve attendance and minimize tardiness and absenteeism

So far, the DE is skeptical of “team building” or “student assistance team meetings” which they do not consider professional development time. They have likewise denied simply prorating a counselor’s time, even though the counselor spends more of it with these students. Once the student is identified, then the program is determined – such that the counselor meets weekly at specified times to provide additional programming. They will more likely accept a program that explains what the counselor does at the weekly meeting with the student, providing skill building around study skills or relationship guidance that is above and beyond the regular counseling program available to all students, if a distinct service can be articulated. The school resource officer (SROs) position provides another example – if the SRO monitors attendance for all students, then the DE has rejected their time as allowable. If the SRO provides specific services to the students identified with two or more of the required criteria, define those services as a program and then the expenditure will more likely be allowed.

Narrowing the service focus to the students most at-risk of dropping out and providing supports above and beyond the regular educational program can help students graduate without lowering expectations for their performance. Check out the [Report](#) for additional examples.

Any questions or ideas should be directed to Margaret Buckton (Margaret.buckton@isfis.net or 515-251-5970).