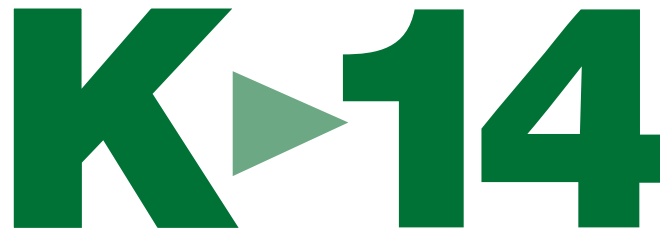


Envisioning K-14 Connections for Rural Minnesota



Rural K-14 Education Survey

May, 2009

Prepared for
Minnesota State Colleges & Universities
in cooperation with
Minnesota Association of School Administrators

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by Sertich Consulting / Chisholm, Minnesota

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Introduction

Background

Most rural Minnesota secondary and post secondary education institutions face a near universal condition of declining enrollments and insufficient funding that fuels a downward spiral of decreasing course offerings and less opportunity for offering the diverse and highly challenging educations that students need and desire. In 2008 Minnesota State Colleges & Universities (MnSCU) in cooperation with the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA) convened a group of rural college presidents and school superintendents to identify potential strategies to address this situation with particular emphasis on how to foster the seamless transition for students from secondary grades 10-12 into post-secondary grades 13 and 14 and explore areas for collaboration.

In 2009 MnSCU sponsored the Envisioning K-14 Connections Work Group to build upon the momentum and interest demonstrated by presidents and superintendents. The first product for the Work Group was a brief strategic plan composed of a Vision, Mission, and Priority Goals. These items are presented in this chapter.

As the Work Group shifts into the task of identifying the educational practices that will achieve this strategic plan, it became clear that additional information was needed. In particular, the Work Group recognized that many better practices are already being used within the state. Thus, a quick survey was conducted of rural colleges and public schools. This paper presents the findings of that survey.

Strategic Plan

Vision

The Envisioning K-14 Connections Work Group has established the following vision for its effort:

Connect learning from Year 10 through 14 by designing new education pathways for rural learners.

Mission

In addition, the Work Group determined that its mission was to:

Identify and remedy the policies and practices that inhibit K-14 connections in Minnesota by clarifying stakeholder¹ desires and proposing appropriate regulatory change.

Priority Goals

The final component of the Work Group's strategic plan is a set of goals whose achievement will greatly advance the cause of seamless K-14 education across rural Minnesota.

1. Recognize and advance better practices of K-14 connections in rural Minnesota.
2. Identify new education pathways that build institutional capacity (e.g., Commonwealth Districts).
3. Eliminate Post Secondary Education Options (PSEO) financial disincentives.
4. Meet requirements of graduation standards in dual-credit college courses.
5. Determine preparatory alignment prior to Year 10 that assures college readiness.

¹ An inclusive group of those affected by rural K-14 education policy and practice change.

Results & Findings

Methodology

MnSCU sent the rural college presidents an email with an attached survey form to be completed and returned. MASA sent rural school district superintendents a *Zoomerang*® (2008 MarketTools, Inc.) survey form to complete and return. The surveys for the two sets of respondents were formatted with the same, or very similar, questions to facilitate ready comparisons in the answers; Appendices A and B present the two sets of survey questions. Responses were received from 8 of 13 rural MnSCU college presidents and 85 of 358 rural school districts superintendents.

The following is a compilation of the results generated by the surveys. Responses have been grouped into general topics.

Areas of Cooperation – Existing Partnerships

When asked to note their postsecondary partnership and cooperation, 98% of secondary respondents indicated that they are cooperating with MnSCU institutions to offer postsecondary opportunities to high school students and all the MnSCU respondents indicated cooperation with a nearby school district. The top areas of cooperation listed by both secondary and postsecondary respondents are: concurrent offerings, postsecondary enrollment options (PSEO), and online courses.

Table 1. Existing Areas of Cooperation		
Partnership	K-12 respondents	MnSCU respondents
Concurrent offerings	70	8
PSEO	54	8
Online courses	41	8
Remote programs (via technology)	18	3
Shared setting	12	2
Individual courses	11	5
Other	8	2

The list of “Other” partnerships identified by respondents includes:

- Applied Learning Institute (specific program available in northeastern Minnesota)
- Online College in the Schools
- PSEO contractual agreements
- Flexible Learning Year
- Use of technology (e.g. interactive TV)
- Shared advising services

High school students participating in postsecondary programs are generally in the 11th (81% of the schools) and 12th (44%) grades although some schools have 9th (10%) grade students involved in the programs.

Among comments concerning overall program participating offered by respondents are:

- ❖ “Increased postsecondary programming is a workload we have taken on with scarce resources and wonderful results...for the good of the students.”

- ❖ “Postsecondary programs offer advanced students an opportunity to get a head start on college. Many of these students earn an Associate’s or Bachelor’s degree in fewer years than those not participating in these programs. These students are able to join the job market earlier and contribute to our economy. An early investment in these advanced high school students offers many positive returns to our state.”

Institutional Coordination

Most superintendents and college presidents noted the institutional benefits of partnership such as:

- Saves time, money, and resources; and
- Opportunity for collaboration rather than competition.

Yet the difficulty of coordinating the institutional or structural aspects of partnerships between high school districts and colleges continues to be a stumbling block for both groups as indicated by the following comments:

- Record keeping is overwhelming.
- Differences in grading.
- Teacher credentialing.
- Scheduling conflicts (classes, athletics).
- Can create competition between high schools and colleges.
- Drain on personnel and resources (counselors).
- Difficult to implement in small schools due to resources, interest, geography, etc.

Among the comments offered by respondents are:

- ❖ “The interrelationships with school districts and faculty are important for the future when we endeavor to change the ‘silos’ that currently exist.”
- ❖ “We need some help with the credentialing process. I believe that we need quality teachers, but replacing them if they leave causes some problems. Could there be a 1 or 2 year waiver to help? If I lose a college teacher in June, I may not be able to have them replaced by September with a certified teacher, but one that is capable. We need some flexibility here please.”

Costs & Funding – Who pays?

The issue that came up repeatedly throughout the survey results is the cost/funding of these programs. While postsecondary programs present great cost savings to students and families, these programs, especially PSEO, are often operated at a loss to high schools. Concern over this issue was raised by both college presidents and secondary school superintendents.

Comments from the superintendents highlight various aspects of this serious issue:

- ❖ "Cost, we send big checks to BSU and Northwest Tech along with checks to U of M Crookston"
- ❖ "Resources are always scarce. If it costs us more to offer post-secondary programs, something else must be sacrificed."
- ❖ “Collaboration is a better answer than competing. Some students are ready and we are meeting their needs. We are competing for these students and funding.”
- ❖ “Financial resources leave the district to pay for credits.”
- ❖ “The state needs to help support school districts’ tuition expenses or allow districts to charge back the costs to the individual students.”
- ❖ “Loss of revenue for the public school is the biggest drawback.”
- ❖ “If the student goes full time PSEO then there are not any fair financial arrangements. The money flows straight to them. As a small rural school located within miles of colleges that offer PSEO courses, the enrollment in those effect the offerings for the students who stay in our building. This in turn makes it hard for budget planning from year to year. It puts us in a hard place because the program is good for some students, but not all!”

Comments from college presidents echo those concerns and raise others:

- ❖ “The principle issue is the loss of funding for the high school.”
- ❖ “PSEO creates animosity between secondary and postsecondary [institutions] because someone is ‘losing’ (both \$ and students).”
- ❖ “With declining enrollment and need for more school funding, the various options provided to students come at a real cost to the high schools. This can sometimes ‘hurt’ the working relationships that are being built between the colleges and high schools.”

High School Atmosphere

High schools benefit greatly from the academic and social aspects of postsecondary programming, but the loss of the brightest students to PSEO is still a serious issue raised by many who responded to the survey. The following are the most common benefits to the high school atmosphere created by such programs:

- Increased rigor.
- More course options for eligible students.
- Range of online courses not limited by geography.
- Online and Concurrent PSEO keep students in the high schools and with their social networks.
- Postsecondary options in the schools give secondary teachers experience and knowledge about what is needed to ready students for college and life.
- Raises the standard for teaching and learning in secondary schools.

One comment offered by a respondent highlights a key drawback:

- ❖ “PSEO often takes the best and brightest students out of the [high school] classroom, which can limit the depth of discussion and learning for other students who could benefit from their knowledge and expertise.”

Student Growth & Readiness

The issue of students’ readiness for college level coursework in high school was brought up in many survey responses as was the benefits and challenges to a student’s personal growth and development by participating in these programs.

Benefits to students:

- Increases the likelihood of the student actually attending postsecondary school.
- Students who are college ready get an opportunity to “ease” into college with the support of high schools.
- PSEO applies toward high school rank and graduation.
- Variety of postsecondary options for high school students caters to the needs of students’ different learning styles.
- Some students who take advantage of these opportunities are first generation college students.
- Students can build early relationships with college faculty.
- Course material is engaging, it is relevant, it is not boring.

Challenges to students:

- Students may leave high school with college credits but are not sure of their goals and thus some of the credits may be irrelevant.
- Student may not be ready or able to assess their own preparedness for college-level coursework.
- Poor performance in postsecondary programs can negatively impact a student’s high school graduation and future college or professional career.

- Students can feel family pressure, particularly in tough economic times, to be in postsecondary programs due to the tuition cost savings for their families.

Among the comments offered by respondents are:

- ❖ “For the independent, mature students, the challenge can be a positive growth experience. It can be a good experience for the right student.”
- ❖ “Adolescents are in HS for 4 years for the much needed emotional/maturity development. Some do PSEO for the wrong reasons – money.”

Building Awareness – Informing Students and Parents

There is considerable difference between high schools and colleges regarding the involvement of parents in making decisions about their students’ involvement in postsecondary programs. While nearly all (90%) secondary school respondents indicated that they include parents in high school student access to postsecondary opportunities only two-thirds of the college respondents noted any parent involvement.

There was also a high degree of similarity in the techniques used by high schools to engage parents in the process:

- Parent-student information sessions (72%).
- Newsletters (61%).
- Parent-teacher conferences (59%)

In addition, most high schools and all the colleges did their contact work when students are in the 9th and 10th grades. However, nearly one quarter of the high schools began the information process as early as the 8th grade.

There is significant variation in the methods employed by the colleges to inform prospective students about their postsecondary opportunities. The overall situation may best be summarized by one college respondent who wrote “*We really need to do a better job of this!*” and another who said “*We only attend HS information sessions when invited.*” Some institutions had no parent contact process and none of the colleges utilized all the tools identified through the survey. The range of methods to contact students and parents included:

- PSEO information nights at the college.
- Recruiters visiting schools.
- Information at other events such as career fairs.
- Website information.
- Market to superintendents / principals / counselors.
- Print materials available at high schools.
- Send letters to student/parents who are eligible.

Existing Better Practices

A key objective of the survey was to learn about existing practices that potentially could be applied across the state. An impressive list of current practices was generated by the survey and included:

1. The Applied Learning Institute program in place in northeastern Minnesota through the Northeast Higher Education District.
2. High schools participating in Riverland College’s Concurrent Enrollment Programs in which the schools offer resources to the college to support college curriculum, faculty mentoring, and technology for students in the programs.

3. Several colleges partner with regional high schools to provide college readiness support services for junior and senior high school teachers and students. Minnesota State Community & Technical College's (MSCTC) uses its Center for College Readiness.
4. Pine Technical College operates a joint automotives program at Cambridge-Isanti schools with courses taught at East Central.
5. Pine Technical College facilitates large cross-institutional enrollment over interactive television through the East Central Minnesota Educational Cable Cooperative.
6. Northland Community & Technical College conducts orientation session at the beginning of every academic year to bring together high school instructors, mentors, local coordinators, and administrators.
7. Riverland Community & Technical College cooperates with Southland High School to share technology in order to offer college courses over interactive television. Both the high school and college share the curriculum and technology.
8. Joint curriculum development and professional development, joint advising services and sessions, and shared lab equipment/rsources through concurrent enrollment. (MSCTC).
9. Mobile equipment resources for career and technical courses through Custom Training with space/facility resources from the cooperating secondary school. (MSCTC)
10. The Online College in the High School program was noted as a valuable program by respondents in northwestern and western Minnesota.

Recommended Better Practices

At the same time, the survey was an opportunity for respondents to suggest changes that would improve the existing K-14 relationship. Among the recommended changes to improve the secondary / postsecondary cooperative relationship for students and institutions are:

1. Establish a unified articulation process for all MnSCU institutions.
2. Establish a consistent cost system for all MnSCU institutions so students and high schools do not have to "shop around" for the best bargain.
3. Concurrent enrollment could be regionally based around the local MnSCU institutions.
4. Establish a uniform and simplified record keeping system covering all options.
5. Online College in the High School was designed specifically to address the issue of expanding access to college level coursework for students in rural settings who do not have access at this time. Because rural districts may not have the numbers to marshal a concurrent enrollment or on-site contracted tuition section, "pooling" students across districts the program could offer all schools options regardless of size or geographical location.
6. Permit waiver of the requirement that teachers who instruct college classes must have a Master's Degree or equivalent major credits as the current requirement limits instructional opportunities in some smaller districts.
7. Improve communication between colleges and high schools regarding student performance so that high schools can work with students who may be failing in college courses and thus endanger their high school graduation.
8. Minnesota must adopt a cost sharing mechanism that eliminates the economic harm caused by postsecondary options to the high schools. Perhaps the state could consider Iowa's approach where all students receive \$250 for each post secondary class taken and if the student is attending a technical college they receive dual credit and the high school receives 0.6 pupil unit back in funding.

Some Conclusions

A variety of conclusions can be drawn from the results of this survey. Perhaps the overarching conclusion is that the system of postsecondary opportunities is valuable and enhances education for those involved, but there are a number of consequences to the programs that negatively impact school districts and may harm students ill-prepared or ill-suited to be involved in the programs. Despite the known negative features, students, districts and colleges will continue to utilize the programs because the positive impacts are observable and desired.

The following presents other conclusions organized by the strategic plan goals set forth by the Envisioning K-14 Connections Work Group.

1. **Recognize and advance better practices of K-14 connections in rural Minnesota.**
 - ✓ There are a number of better practices in use across the state, but awareness of them may be limited.
 - ✓ There are a number of better practices related to the institutional side of the process (e.g., fees, paperwork, etc.) that need to be streamlined and made uniform across the state.
2. **Identify new education pathways that build institutional capacity (e.g., Commonwealth Districts).**
 - ✓ There may be a need to establish geographic regions within which designated individual MnSCU institutions have the right of first refusal to offer postsecondary programs to the high schools within that region.
3. **Eliminate Post Secondary Education Options (PSEO) financial disincentives.**
 - ✓ Both the high schools and colleges recognize the huge financial impact on the high schools caused by some postsecondary programs.
 - ✓ The cost impact is causing friction between some institutions.
 - ✓ In some cases the the cost impact is harming the high schools' ability to provide quality programming for those students who do not enroll in the postsecondary programs.
4. **Meet requirements of graduation standards in dual-credit college courses.**
5. **Determine preparatory alignment prior to Year 10 that assures college readiness.**
 - ✓ Some colleges and high schools have adopted practices to help insure that students and parents are ready for postsecondary programs.
 - ✓ There are a number of ways for colleges to communicate with prospective students and their parents but few of the colleges exercise all or even most of these tools.

Appendix A. College Survey

1. Are you currently working in cooperation with any school districts to provide post-secondary opportunities for high school students?
 Yes No

2. If yes, what are the areas of cooperation?
 College courses in high school
 PSEO on college campuses
 Remote programs; operating at the same time in both high school and college setting connected via technology.
 Share setting – students at a nearby or shared campus.
 Online courses.
 Invidividual courses offered in another cooperative manner.
 Other.

3. When does your college start informing students about these postsecondary options?
 9th grade 10th grade 11th grade 12th grade

4. Do you conduct any “awareness advertising” (mailings, brochures, open information sessions) targeted to high school students and/or their parents regarding the availability of postsecondary enrollment options (PSEO) opportunities?
 Yes No

5. If yes, please describe your efforts?

6. When does your college have students participate in postsecondary options?
 9th grade 10th grade 11th grade 12th grade

7. Does your college include parents in planning high school student access to post-secondary opportunities? If yes, how?
 Yes No

8. Please identify two or three primary benefits of creating and operating postsecondary programs for students in high school.

9. Please identify two or three drawbacks of creating and operating postsecondary programs for students in high school.

10. Which school districts provide the best support for your high school programming? [List all that apply]

11. Which school districts provide the fairest financial arrangement for your college when engaging in cooperative efforts? [List all that apply.]

Appendix B. Secondary Survey

1. Are you currently working in cooperation with any MnSCU school on post-secondary opportunities for high school students in any manner?
 Yes No

2. If so, what are the areas of cooperation?
 College courses in high school
 PSEO on college campuses
 Remote programs; operating at the same time in both high school and college setting connected via technology.
 Share setting – students at a nearby or shared campus.
 Online courses.
 Invidividual courses offered in another cooperative manner.
 Other.

3. When does you school start informing students regarding access to college / technical school education options?
 8th grade 9th grade 10th grade 11th grade

4. When does you your school have students participate in college / technical school education options?
 9th grade 10th grade 11th grade 12th grade

5. Does your school include parents in planning high school student access to post-secondary options?
 Yes No

6. If yes, in what ways are parents included / informed?
 Parent-student information sessions.
 Newsletters
 Parent-teacher conferences
 Other

7. Describe the benefits of creating and operating post-secondary programs for students in high school.

8. Describe the drawbacks of creating and operating post-secondary programs for students in high school.