



**Listening to New Voices**  
**Youth Voices on Staying in School & Dropout Prevention in Minnesota**

A report by The Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health at the University of Minnesota, with support from the Minnesota Department of Education's Dropout Prevention, Retention, and Graduation Initiative

Winter, 2009

## The Dropout Prevention, Retention & Graduation Initiative

In September of 2005, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) was selected as one of six states to receive a three-year School Dropout Prevention grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

### Initiative Goals

- Develop a comprehensive dropout prevention model for implementation at high school and middle school levels
- Develop tools that can be used to enhance the development and implementation of effective programming
- Increase statewide and local coordination to address dropout prevention
- Provide support and technical assistance for local education agencies
- Increase the likelihood of continued implementation of successful dropout prevention components and sustainability of grant success beyond the funding period

A key focus was to increase successful school completion for groups of students who are at greater risk (on average) of leaving school before getting a diploma including students of color, low-income students and students with disabilities.

One high school and one middle school from each of the following districts participated in the initiative: Brooklyn Center, Duluth, Hibbing, Park Rapids, Red Lake, Richfield, and St. Paul. High schools in these districts were selected to participate because of dropout rates that were higher than the state average – and because of their diverse characteristics including varied enrollment sizes, regional location, and the broad range of students served in terms of race, ethnicity, immigrant status and socioeconomic background.

Coordination and oversight of the Initiative was assigned to a Steering Committee composed of representatives from a variety of relevant statewide organizations. The Steering Committee also generated a report that includes specific recommendations to ensure continuation of the work beyond the funding period. Some of these recommendations are already being used in pilot school districts. Examples of their efforts are referenced throughout this document as “Initiative Actions.”

To ensure that the perspective of young people was included in their recommendations, the Steering Committee conducted listening groups across the state. The Listening Groups allowed the Steering Committee to gather information from young people about supports that must be in place to better engage students in school and facilitate successful school completion.



## The Listening Groups

In the Fall of 2007 and continuing through the Winter and Spring of 2008, Dropout Prevention Initiative Steering Committee members conducted listening groups on the subject of dropout prevention throughout the state of Minnesota with middle and high school aged youth.

The listening groups were intended to provide a window into youth attitudes on the subjects of dropout prevention and school completion. This report is not intended to be a comprehensive representation of all youth voices across the state and those surveyed were not chosen by a random sampling method. This report is only a snapshot of one moment in time from selected youth in various locations across Minnesota.

### Methods

Most listening group sessions lasted between one and two hours. The discussions centered around four broad topics which then elicited further in-depth discussion and a summary of observations.

1. Students were asked about their personal experience with dropping out of school, the circumstances for dropping out and expectations for completing school.
2. Students identified reasons for dropping out, barriers to staying in school, and influences for dropping out.
3. Students were asked for reasons for staying in school, the role of their family and peers in that decision, and support mechanisms at the school.
4. Students identified reason(s) for returning to school and alternative options for completing school.

### Participants

Listening group students were in the 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. While the vast majority of youth participating were either experiencing difficulty in school or had dropped out and returned to school, the groups also contained a small number of those thriving in school.

The listening groups were facilitated in 11 different counties across Minnesota. Locations included urban cities, suburban communities, small towns, rural areas and an Indian reservation.

The youth who participated were:

- English-speaking and those who spoke a primary language other than English.
- Attending traditional schools, alternative learning centers, and charter schools.
- Of African, European, Hmong, Lao, Latino and Native descent, U.S. born or born elsewhere.
- Male and female; both straight and self-identified GLBT.
- Living with parents or relatives, in foster homes or homeless.



Listening Group County Locations

Participating students spoke freely and identified areas of concern regarding school dropout, both in terms of what makes it difficult to thrive in school and which individuals, systems and policies make it easier to complete and succeed in school.

The larger themes identified by the youth seemed to coalesce into three areas:

- **The students themselves:** their needs and expectations for school and education.
- **Their families and the communities in which they live:** the nature of family support (or lack of) and community engagement in their education.
- **The schools they attend:** the climate and environment, including relationships with teachers and adults, in which students immerse themselves.





## The Students Themselves

The challenges facing youth today are many and complex. Yet young people are much more than the sum of their problems or personal assets and strengths. The manner in which society supports young people, through nurturing, investments and personal engagement, is a strong determinant to the future progress and durability of that society. Research has shown that intentionally meeting their needs and supporting the factors that protect them is the best way to equip them to overcome the challenges discussed in this report.

Young people said that others expected them to stay in school, expressed confidence in their abilities, wanted them to have a better future, go to college, be a successful person, have a good life, live life on their own, and be able to depend on themselves.

### Motivated towards long-term goals and dreams

Most of the listening group students recognized the importance and benefits of finishing school and how it would help them advance toward their future goals. Some had a desire to get a diploma, go to college, and get a good job. Strong individual determination in the face of competing negative influences demonstrated the resiliency of many youth in the sessions. Several students stated that completing school is about proving to themselves that they can do it and many students identified a high paying job as a long-term goal. Fewer students identified college as a motivating factor to stay in school.

### Youth Voices

#### Why do young people drop out of school?

- Pregnancy
- Need to parent and the shortage of affordable day care
- Feeling unsafe in school
- Chemical dependency issues
- Physical and mental health issues
- Wanting or needing to work
- Gang activity
- Lacking ambition and motivation
- The belief that there are better things for them to do with their time outside of school
- Absence of support from family
- Falling so far behind in coursework that it's impossible to imagine ever getting caught up
- The state statute that allows them to drop out at age 16
- Lack of respect by peers

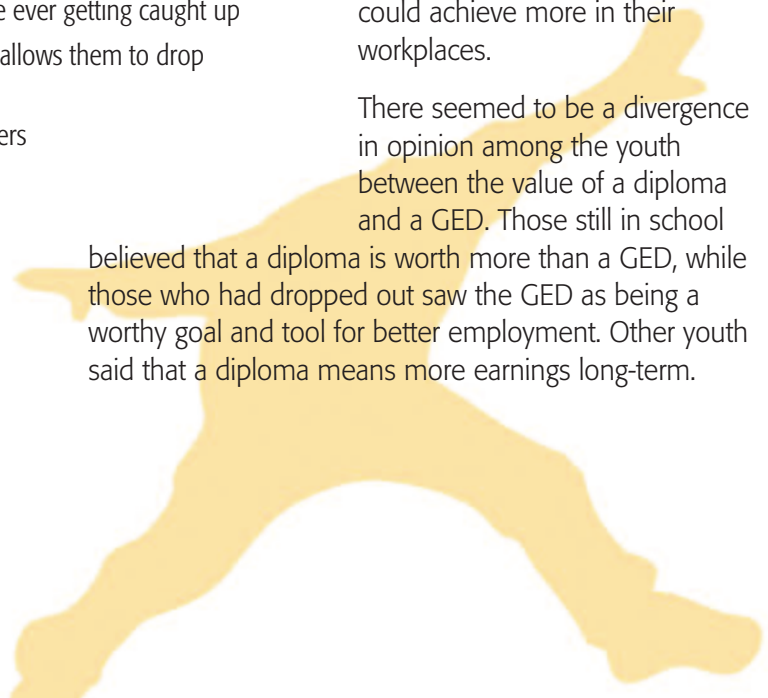
“I have a lot of dreams to fulfill.”

The diverse nature of Minnesota’s school population, rural, suburban and urban, creates unique challenges for students as they envision their future. Several suburban students mentioned not wanting to be like adults and families in their communities who had not graduated.

They said that the community, friends, and some family members all play a particular role of either pushing them or not pushing them to attend (stay in) school. Different pressures face rural students. A Latino student in rural Minnesota spoke with great frustration of his immigration status and its impact on his educational future. “I want to go to college, but can’t.”

When asked why young people drop out of school, many young people said the need or desire to work and make money. While several students said that it seemed easier to work, some students who had dropped out returned to school when they realized that with a diploma they could achieve more in their workplaces.

There seemed to be a divergence in opinion among the youth between the value of a diploma and a GED. Those still in school believed that a diploma is worth more than a GED, while those who had dropped out saw the GED as being a worthy goal and tool for better employment. Other youth said that a diploma means more earnings long-term.





### Students Themselves (continued)

A suburban female student said that she realized dropping out is “the sucker’s way out...it’s just running from something.” She imagined what else she would run from in life if she ran from school. What is clear is the often conflicting forces facing many students: short-term needs and priorities versus long-term goals to better their lives.

### Personal burdens and loss of hope

Many students said that once behind in their class work, it seemed impossible to catch up; once behind in credits, it was easier to give up and just drop out. Latino students who are undocumented expressed with resignation the belief that a diploma won’t have a positive effect in their lives.

Yet, it should be noted: many students, even immigrant students, are aware of the opportunities that await them after successfully completing school.

“I see it [school] not as four long years of high school but four years of opportunities to learn,” said a Hmong female freshman student in an urban high school.

A Latino high school student from a small town spoke of wanting a better lifestyle for himself and his future family. His parents see him as an example to his younger siblings in middle school.

### Peers and friends

While some students felt that friends can influence someone to drop out of school, others felt their friends kept them in school. Not surprisingly, the type of friends a young person has is critical. A lack of friends at school can encourage a young

“I love the competition.”

person to seek friendships elsewhere and reinforce negative attitudes towards school. Many students told stories of friends who encouraged them to stay and complete school; still others spoke of friends who supported their return to school and offered them academic and personal support.

### Initiative Action

#### Planning for Continued Learning Beyond Middle and High School

Washington Middle School students in St. Paul are given extensive support in creating six-year plans for graduation and beyond.

Part of the planning process includes college visits as well as transition/orientation visits to the high school they plan to attend in the 9th grade.

“I want to be the first Hmong president!”



## Their Families and Communities

When young people find success, it is the result of many factors coming together. Young people's strengths must be supported with parental support, school connectedness and a community engaged in the lives of young people.

### Family support

One student spoke of how his dad puts pressure on him to graduate. A female student said her mom and aunt encourage her to succeed in school. But other young people spoke of family members who encouraged their dropping out of school so the student can work and financially support the family or provide care for an ill family member.

Extended family also play a role. A 17-year old suburban high school male dropped out of school to have more fun. He spent his days playing video games and sleeping. After awhile he got bored and missed his friends who were still in school. His cousin encouraged him to return. At the time of the listening group he planned on graduating and continuing his education beyond high school.

### Dynamics of culture, family and community

Many young people said they wanted to be different from their families. A female student said that her dad had dropped out and that she didn't want to make the same mistake.

One student spoke of his motivation coming from looking at his community and seeing what not to do. While he acknowledged that some people have little choice in their particular situations, he doesn't want to end up like his uncles who, in his mind, just lack motivation. Others spoke of wanting to defy their families and communities and prove wrong those who say they won't graduate.

**“I see school as the ticket out.”**

## Youth Voices

### How do families contribute or influence a young person to not complete school?

- Chemical dependency and/or mental health issues
- Low family expectations to complete school
- Lack of support or outright discouragement from parents and family
- Limited or lack of parental involvement in their education/schooling
- Illness in the family
- Parents not valuing education or weak parental modeling
- Requesting or requiring young people to work to support the family
- Family gang activity
- Homelessness
- Family conflicts, including fighting and abuse

Cultural influences, again, are important components of a young person's connectedness to school and learning. “My dad discourages me [from staying in school]. But I am determined to stay in school...I will be the first to graduate from high school in my family. My two older brothers dropped out, and I saw their mistakes,” said a Hmong male urban high school student.

Hmong students also spoke of the cultural complexities of female students attending school, particularly if the student is married. One female student from an urban high school said “My husband was not very supportive of my education. He thought that if I became educated, I would leave him. So he would always find something for me to do at home and he would not let me learn how to drive.”

## Initiative Action

### Fostering Connections between Schools and Parents

At both the Middle School and the High School, Brooklyn Center offers an online Parent Portal Access that facilitates greater awareness of school activities and encourages involvement. The system allows parents access to student grades and attendance on a daily basis.



## The Schools They Attend

Students spend about 20% of their waking hours at school. Beyond the brick and mortar, schools are places where young people socialize, learn interpersonal communication skills and build cooperation skills which will last a lifetime. The “meaning” of schools has to be multi-dimensional and flexible to meet the needs of a diverse population of youth.

### Connectedness and Inclusion

The young people participating in the listening sessions called for more enthusiastic and engaged teachers who genuinely cared about their students and respected them as individuals. Two different students from two different suburban high schools expressed this belief almost identically, commenting that “We are told to respect the teachers, but they don’t have to respect us.”

Students expressed an opinion that the absence of connectedness with a caring adult in school made it easier for some students to drop out. Conversely, students across all sites said that there is a greater likelihood of classroom and school success when there is a caring teacher to whom they feel connected.

Many listening group students believed that staff does not take the time to get to know students or learn about and understand the different cultures represented by the students in the school. According to one: “The teachers assume that they know us from what they see but really they do not know.” Another offered that teachers should “ask us what’s going on in our lives.”

One student suggested that students should be asked to evaluate the performance of their teachers. Most thought that class sizes were too large for them to really connect with their teachers.

**“My science teacher checks in with me and encourages me often.”**

### Youth Voices

#### What are the school or school-related barriers that keep young people from staying in school?

- Unfair, uncaring, unconnected staff
- Inconsistent and/or rigid policies
- The lack of outreach to students in need
- Limited use of creative learning strategies
- School environments that stifle student success

At setting after setting, students could name those particular teachers whom they respected and spoke about them with enthusiasm and praise. The students singled out those educational professionals who demonstrated care, believed in their ability to learn, and made allowances for their individual circumstances. Several rural high school youth spoke with enthusiasm for one teacher who “brings it down to our level” and with praise for another teacher who prints reports to let students know what they are missing so they can get caught up.

Students valued after school sports and extracurricular activities, access to the library, and extra help with study skills and homework; these were all motivators to stay in school. To them, these resources demonstrated that school personnel cared about their progress and believed they could succeed.

Preferential treatment towards athletes, scholars, wealthy students or those with a “good family name” was cited often as an unfair practice by school staff. Students spoke of the cliques that develop from this preferential treatment and the resultant lack of

### Initiative Action

#### Connecting Middle School Staff with Disengaged Students

Richfield Middle School utilizes a mentoring program adapted from Check & Connect, an evidence-based model of student engagement. The program utilizes staff as mentors for students exhibiting signs of disengaging from school.



## The Schools They Attend (continued)

tolerance of others who look or act different. Students resented being “labeled” and having one’s “label” predetermine how staff would approach them and related to them.

Rural students spoke of the challenges of attending school in a small community where everyone seems to know everyone else in town. They talked about the power of a “family name” and the struggles to overcome other family members’ reputations in their community. If you’re from a certain family, not in a preferred clique, act different than the established norm, it’s difficult to go to school each and every day.

**“I stay in school because I don’t want my program leader to be disappointed in me.”**

### Environment

Nearly unanimously, students in the listening groups called for a more positive learning environment in schools. Some students cited bullies and an unsafe school environment as a reason why some students may not even want to come to school. Other students spoke of feeling unsafe going to and from school each day: “I walk to and from school. It is not safe to walk home alone late in the evening and I do not have a car. So I would rather go home than stay after school.”

Self-identified GLBT students and students of color in Greater Minnesota indicated that harassment, mostly verbal, made school feel unsafe.

The young people spoke of student creativity being discouraged. Some said that the school’s inflexible policies do not adapt to individual needs and that frequently their own individual learning needs were not being met.

### Initiative Action

#### Ensuring a Safe Middle School Learning Environment

Park Rapids Middle School implemented the Olweus Bully Prevention Program and reduced incidences of bullying and improved school climate.

Students spoke of burdensome homework loads for those students working to support their families; this is particularly true for students of families that are struggling financially and of immigrant families. Other students talked about language barriers, when the language spoken at home is either not spoken or generally not accepted at school.

The young people at the listening group sessions wanted a better social environment at their school. Many students felt that school staff was ill trained to manage the “drama” of a few students who created challenging situations for many other students.

### Initiative Action

#### Collaborating with Community for Student Leadership Training

Red Lake school district offers Leadership Training Opportunity in conjunction with local community groups (The 21st Century Learning Center and the Boys and Girls Club). The goal of the project is to train students as peer mentors and foster leadership skills.



## The Schools They Attend (continued)

Some students advocated for a voluntary time-out option during the day to prevent incidents with teachers and peers from escalating further. Students from several settings talked about wanting more time to move between classes and more opportunities for positive, “drama-free” social interactions with fellow students.

“I stay in school because I love learning.”

### Classes

Several students called for more interesting classes, with hands-on experiences that bring learning concepts to life and better engage student curiosity. Many of the young people said that they would be more motivated to attend if teachers would try to make learning more fun. Some said that the loss of electives, especially those that teach practical skills, makes it more difficult to enjoy school and be excited about learning.

Many students felt that too much emphasis was placed on basic skills tests, especially since some students who have the credits, but don't pass the tests, cannot graduate.

African American students at an urban school spoke with great frustration of asking their teachers for more work, more challenges, but receiving no response. Others stated that some teachers don't encourage students to reach their full potential. One said that schools should contact or even visit the family when a student isn't in school; the youth claimed that many parents do not know how to connect with the school, access school policies, or advocate for their child's academic progress. Many said that little attention is given to truant students.

Other students cited inconsistent school policies like changing the number of credits to graduate during their high school years. Some students said that

### Initiative Action

#### Creating Individualized Approaches for Student Success

Hibbing's Home School Interventionist works with a small group of students and their families. Students receive additional support to develop individual goals, plan for success, monitor grades and attendance, and build relationships with caring adults.

double classes are just too long to hold their attention. Male participants, across settings, said that teachers should find new ways to integrate more physical activity and hands-on learning into their teaching.

Consistently, students praised alternative learning centers as providing options for nontraditional students and programming that made allowances for students in situations that call for flexibility, including different school day hours. This flexibility was particularly important for working parents or homeless students. For example, childcare is an essential offering for working parents, who often are making minimum wage.

Schools need to provide alternative ways to meet the needs of these students, providing for learning on top of basic survival needs. Students across settings favored choices that allow pursuit of a diploma or a GED.

### Initiative Action

#### Developing Culturally Competent High School Staff

Duluth's Denfeld High School staff utilizes the IDI (Intercultural Development Inventory) to educate and self-evaluate current levels of cultural competence.

The IDI includes ongoing reflection and activities to promote relevant instructional strategies and understanding of student contexts.

## Recommendations Informed by Minnesota Youth

As the School Dropout Prevention grant came to a conclusion, the Initiative's Steering Committee developed a report that contained recommendations directed at educators, community organizations and policymakers who are working to engage students in school and improve graduation rates.

Many perspectives and voices informed the Steering Committee's report and recommendations. Young people's voices were particularly helpful in guiding recommendations that address schools' orientation, approach and ability to support students on the path to completing school.

The complete list of 25 recommendations, research and supporting materials are available in the full report. It also includes strategies and additional examples of "Initiative Action" currently underway in pilot districts.

Listed below are recommendations from the Steering Committee report that are most closely aligned with the voices of Minnesota youth. Rather than presenting them in the four areas identified by the Steering Committee (see sidebar), the recommendations are organized by young people's own ideas and themes.



### "A safe place I feel connected to..."

#### **Recommendation 1.1**

Foster a sense of belonging and connectedness for all students by creating positive relationships with caring adults.

#### **Recommendation 1.2**

Create school environments or school climates that are positive, safe and welcoming.

#### **Recommendation 2.7**

Encourage school-community collaboration to support programs and activities that will sustain caring environments inside of and outside of school where youth can develop, learn and thrive.

#### **Recommendation 2.4**

Utilize research-based dropout prevention strategies designed to increase student engagement in school and learning such as after-school activities, mentoring, tutoring, service learning, alternative learning programs, and safe learning environments (for more information see National Dropout Prevention Center/Network <http://www.dropoutprevention.org>).

### Steering Committee Report

#### Insights and Recommendations

The Initiative's Steering Committee documented 25 recommendations that are categorized into four areas:

1. Orientation/approach to dropout prevention
2. Strategies and considerations for supporting students placed most at-risk
3. Minnesota Department of Education (MDE)'s role
4. Provisions focused on sustainability

To download the complete report, go to <http://education.state.mn.us> and click on the *Dropout Prevention, Retention and Graduation Initiative* tab.

## Recommendations Informed by Minnesota Youth (continued)

“Teachers and staff  
who understand me...”

### Recommendation 1.3

Promote ongoing staff development to examine, identify and understand unique contextual issues of all students being served. A mutual and ongoing exchange of information between specific communities and educators allows flexibility to adapt to a variety of circumstances.

### Recommendation 1.5

Promote staff retention by building on consistency, expertise, capacity and the power of initiatives to increase student engagement and prevent dropout across years.

### Recommendation 2.1

Ensure the discussion of and movement towards cultural competence for all educators, support staff, administrators and others working with youth in school. Cultural competence is embodied by a commitment to open-mindedness, the confrontation of stereotypical thinking and the creation of an atmosphere of care and concern for all students.

“Meet my unique,  
individual needs...”

### Recommendation 2.5

Provide student centered planning that is individualized to meet student needs. Closely monitor students’ progress to support students who are exhibiting signs of disengaging from school.

### Recommendation 2.6

Provide supports to students during key transition periods such as between middle and high school; transition during the year for students new to the school; return to school for students who were suspended; expelled or in care and treatment; and students new to the United States.

“Connect my parents and  
family members to my  
learning...”

### Recommendation 2.2

Establish and maintain an ongoing exchange of information between parents, families and school staff.

### Recommendation 2.3

Emphasize the important role that parent support can play in student learning (inside and outside of school) and encourage a focus on family engagement in student learning.

## Conclusion

The Minnesota Department of Education’s Dropout Prevention, Retention and Graduation Initiative made significant progress in identifying effective ways of reducing the rate of school dropouts and increasing the graduation rate. The end result was a strong foundation of knowledge upon which further efforts can be built with clearly specified action steps to ensure sustainability of effort. Future efforts will require cross-agency collaboration and the sustained input and participation of schools, families, communities and non-government entities like foundations, businesses and places of worship.

Minnesota has the knowledge and resources it needs to sustain and enhance the efforts started by the Dropout Prevention, Retention and Graduation Initiative. This Initiative is a launching pad for future work in the fight to ensure that all Minnesota students graduate from high school and that all Minnesotans come to believe that even one dropout is too many.

## Acknowledgements

The Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health thanks the following Steering Committee members of the Minnesota Department of Education’s Dropout Prevention, Retention, and Graduation Initiative for their contributions to addressing the school dropout issue in Minnesota and, particularly, for their conducting listening groups resulting in the youth voices expressed throughout this report.

### Steering Committee

William Autrey, Richfield, ISD 280	Leila Farah, Minnesota Department of Human Services	Glory Kibbel, Minnesota Department of Education	Arnold Pemberton, Red Lake, ISD 38
Ev Arnold, Red Lake, ISD 38	Michael Finco, Hibbing, ISD 701	John Klinke, Red Lake, ISD 38	Mike Raich, Hibbing, ISD 701
Roger Banks, Council on Black Minnesotans	Kate Foate-Trewick, Richfield, ISD 280	Anita Larson, U of M, Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare	Nichelle Rivers, Minneapolis Public Schools
Bryan Bass, Brooklyn Center, ISD 286	Christine Ganzlin, The McKnight Foundation	Cammy Lehr, Minnesota Department of Education	Sean Roy, PACER Center
Robert Belluzzo, Hibbing, ISD 701	Joel Gibson, Institute for New Americans	Keith Lester, Brooklyn Center, ISD 286	Nancy Schaefer, School Success Initiative, HSPHD - Hennepin County
Brenda Johnson Boterman, Park Rapids, ISD 309	Brent Gish, Red Lake, ISD 38	Maurice Nins, Jr., Minnesota Department of Public Safety	Paul Snyder, U of M, Minnesota Youth Community Learning Initiative
Heather Britt, Allina Hospitals and Clinics	Lyle Goins, Red Lake, ISD 38	David Nusbaum, Lutheran Social Services	Kay Tracy, Minnesota Department of Employment & Economic Development
Sonia Cordero, Chicano Latino Affairs Council	Bruce Gravalin, Century Middle School, Park Rapids, ISD 309	Jody Manning, PACER Center	Malcolm Wax, Red Lake, ISD 38
Brent Colligan, Red Lake, ISD 38	Anna Marie Hill Klinehouse, Minnesota Indian Affairs Council	Milica Mitterhauser, Hennepin County Research, Planning and Development Department	Julia Williams, University of Minnesota-Duluth
Ed Crawford, Denfeld Senior High, Duluth ISD 709	Marcie Jefferys, U of M, Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare	Kyiunga Olson, Minnesota Department of Corrections – Red Wing	Ron Williams, Arlington High School, St. Paul, ISD 625
Jane Delage, Minnesota Department of Human Services	Donna Johnson, U of M, Institute on Community Integration	Kate Onyeneho, Center for Africans New to America	Kevin Wolff, Arlington High School, St. Paul, ISD 625
Stuart Desjarlait, Red Lake, ISD 38	Don Johnson, Hennepin County Attorney’s Office	Brenda Pautsch, Blue Earth County Corrections	Chu Wu, Upper Midwest Community Policing Institute
Jina Downwind, School Success Initiative, HSPHD - Hennepin County	Alan Judson, Park Rapids, ISD 309	Robert “Sonny” Peacock, White Earth Tribal Community College	David Zander, Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans
Oscar Echandi, Chicano Latino Affairs Council			

Finally, this report would not have been possible without the willingness and openness of youth and adult participants in the community listening groups. The candid words from young people in the following communities significantly increased our awareness and appreciation for the genuine realities of school dropout throughout the state of Minnesota.

### Community Listening Groups

Amboy	Duluth	Mapleton	Rogers
Becker	Elk River	McGregor	St. Paul
Brooklyn Center	Faribault	Minneapolis	Worthington
Cass Lake	Fergus Falls	Minnesota Lake	
Dakota County	Good Thunder	Richfield	

## The Konopka Institute

Dr. Gisela Konopka, after whom the Konopka Institute is named, was an early voice in the field of healthy youth development. As a longtime faculty member in the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota, Gisela was a pioneer in the social group work method, where she would engage young people by listening to them, hearing their stories, their dreams, their aspirations. Gisela believed in the potential of all young people to achieve their dreams and advocated throughout her lifetime for policies that foster healthy youth development and successful transitions from adolescence to adulthood.

Housed at the University of Minnesota, The Konopka Institute works in partnership with community organizations, service providers, policy makers and public agencies to promote the use of best practices, policies and systems that show the greatest promise of supporting genuine healthy youth development.



### The Konopka Institute

for Best Practices in Adolescent Health  
717 Delaware St SE – Third Floor  
Minneapolis, MN 55414  
612-626-2820  
<http://www.konopka.umn.edu>

*Gisela Konopka*  
Konopka Institute for Best Practices in Adolescent Health

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## The Minnesota Department of Education

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) strives to be an innovative education agency serving a wide range of customers: approximately 850,000 K-12 students and their families; 118,000 young children participating in a variety of early learning programs including Head Start and ECFE; 82,000 adult learners participating in adult education programs including GED and citizenship programs; Minnesota's 339 school districts and over 52,000 licensed teachers. MDE's mission is to: Improve educational achievement by establishing clear standards, measuring performance, assisting educators and increasing opportunities for lifelong learning.

The Minnesota Department of Education focuses on four primary goals:

1. Improve Achievement for all Students.
2. Enhance Teacher Quality.
3. Expand Education Options for Students and Families.
4. Implement Education Finance Reform and Enhance Accountability.

### Minnesota Department of Education

1500 Highway 36 West  
Roseville, MN 55113  
651-582-8200  
<http://www.education.state.mn.us>



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