Open Enrollment Tops Discussion at Summer Retreat

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Open enrollment, a system that allows parents or guardians to apply for their children to attend school districts other than the one in which they reside, was a primary topic of discussion during the MU Partnership for Educational Renewal (MPER) Governing Board summer retreat. An important segment of the meeting was a roundtable discussion session conducted with three Missouri Senators and three members of the House of Representatives. All six are members of their respective education committees.

At the request of Missouri Senator Robert Mayer and Representative Maynard Wallace, the board addressed the topic of open enrollment during an evening round-table discussion. Both legislators agreed that there is a strong potential of a bill being developed this year dealing with open enrollment for Missouri students.

In addition to Mayer and Wallace, Senators David Pearce and Rita Days, and Representatives Joe Aull and Rodney Schad joined the discussion with the primary focus on what components and safeguards need to be included in such a bill to meet the educational needs of Missouri’s children.

Mayer sponsored Senate Bill 373, a bill to create procedures for open enrollment of public school students across school district boundary lines, in February 2009. The bill was referred to the Senate Education Committee for review, but did not reach a vote.

Mayer spoke about how he believed that each student has unique educational needs and may need a different environment to have a healthy learning experience. “I think that certain students that may have deficiencies in certain areas, whatever they might be, might find it better and more productive if they attended a school that met their needs,” he said. “And so, that was one of the driving forces for me filing an open enrollment bill.”

Concerns were shared on topics such as the movement of children with special education needs, fiscal burdens, transportation needs, and the implications for athletics. Six

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Success is not forever, 
and failure isn’t fatal.

—Don Shula
A Need and an Opportunity: Suicide Prevention

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Suicide rates continue an unabated climb in the United States. Of particular concern in Missouri are the escalating rates among elementary and middle school students.

To illustrate, I have been contacted on two suicide completions, both of whom were under ten years of age and committed suicide the last week of summer school. Besides the obvious grief and loss, I was asked to comment about the school desiring to plant a tree in their honor as well as produce t-shirts recognizing those who had died. While these deaths were certainly tragic, the reaction (tree, shirt) of these schools is exactly what should not be done. Further examples of inappropriate action based upon well intentioned but misguided feelings.

Then, last Friday I received another call from school officials who had “discovered” an apparent mass suicide plan among nine youth. Fortunately, the students were admitted to a hospital for observation.

In these situations, none of the schools had documented evidence-based prevention policies in place. As is characteristic in Missouri, an estimated 90% of schools have “reactive” policies in place. We continually hear about the minimal training at the pre-service level (one student said all of the suicide information received was during a 45-minute lecture), followed by inadequate preparation at the in-service level. A call yesterday from a school district requested access to our materials for an hour of in-service training. I stressed to them the seriousness and expansiveness of this topic and that one hour would not suffice.

Recently, a lawyer for the MSBA did a national search of the states that had proactive prevention-driven programs in place as part of standard school policy. Only two states responded in the affirmative.

Some alarming statistics:

1. According to the Surgeon General, over 90% of youth who commit suicide have a pre-existing, diagnosable mental disorder.
2. The suicide rate for youth aged 10-14 has doubled since 1980.
3. The CDC indicates that adolescent depression is now a national epidemic. Depression is a prime precursor for suicide.
4. Boys are four times more likely to commit suicide than girls, while girls are twice as likely to attempt suicide.
5. Upon a post suicide investigation, a typical finding is “it’s somebody else’s problem” (e.g., school counselor) or “they’re just going through a phase and their negative attitude will eventually go away.”
6. 98% of suicide incidents are predictable.

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Updated 2009-2010 MPER Goals (Continued from page 1)

6. Develop individual and unique field experiences in both urban and rural districts for pre-service teachers.
7. Have the Operations Council contribute toward the evaluation of the education leadership programs of the College of Education Department “Education Leadership & Policy Analysis” (ELPA).
8. Have the Operations Council evaluate the “Mental Health Leadership Academy” and present recommendations to the Governing Board.
9. Have the Operations Council evaluate the “Teacher Release Program” in regards to the inclusion of qualified students from the two community college partners. The council will make recommendations to the Governing Board.
10. Culminate and evaluate three MPER-funded Faculty Research projects. Present research findings to the Operations Council and Governing Board at the October 27, 2009 joint meeting.

Study Group and Teacher Inquiry Funding

A combination of twenty-five individual schools and partner districts have received Study Group and Teacher Inquiry Funding awards for implementation of their projects during the 2009-2010 school year. Congratulations!

Centralia R-VI School District: Chester Boren Middle School
Chillicothe R-II School District: Central Elementary and Chillicothe Middle Schools, Dewey Elementary and Field Elementary Schools
Columbia School District: Benton Elementary School, Derby Ridge Elementary School, Field Elementary School, Mill Creek Elementary School, Parkade Elementary School, Paxton Keeley Elementary School, Rock Bridge Elementary School
Hallsville School District: District Wide
Hannibal #60 School District: District Wide
Hazelwood School District: Walker Elementary School
Lee’s Summit R-VII School District: Bernard Campbell Middle School, Longview Farm Elementary School, Pleasant Lea Elementary School
Mexico 59 School District: McMillan Elementary School
Moberly School District: Gratz Brown Elementary School, Moberly Middle School, North Park Elementary School, South Park Elementary School
Parkway C-2 School District: Pierremont Elementary School, Southwest Middle School

The Study Group and Teacher Inquiry Funding initiative provides partner school buildings and districts with competitive awards of up to $1,500 for projects directly tied to district and MPER goals, and which target increased student achievement. Visit the MPER web site for more information.
Legislators Attend Summer Retreat (Continued from page 1)

groups, each with a legislator present discussed enrollment issues. In addition to the financial implications, Senator Pearce’s group noted that it may be difficult to address student accountability and coordinated curriculum as students transfer from district to district.

Mayer concluded with, “I think it is healthy to have a little competition. It’s been my experience that competition can be good, can be healthy, and can actually make people improve and put forth a better product. And I’m confident that that would occur with our public schools with open enrollment.”

Aull also noted the negative side athletic recruitment that may come with open enrollment and said, “We have got to put some parameters on it so it is an opportunity for some kids, but keep a lid on it where we don’t open up some issues we don’t want to deal with.”

Open enrollment is just one option in part of a growing number of school choice programs in the nation. Options such as open enrollment, vouchers, charter, magnet and home schooling are designed to give parents more control over their children’s education and learning environment.

However, many superintendents at the board meeting believed that the state already has parameters in place to allow for open enrollment to students who meet certain criteria. For example, Missouri Revised Statutes 167.121 allows for a student to transfer from their district of residence to another one due to “unusual or unreasonable transportation hardship because of natural barriers, travel time, or distance.” In addition, Missouri Revised Statues 167.151 provides exemptions to allow students to enroll in non-resident districts.

Suicide Prevention (Continued from page 2)

It is both fortuitous and timely that MPER has chosen this year’s theme for the Mental Health Leadership Academy to focus on more proactive and evidence-based suicide prevention efforts. In concert with this initiative, we are fortunate to having just completed a three-year grant project on this topic from the SAMSHA administration through the Missouri Department of Mental Health.

The result of this effort has culminated in a timely opportunity for the MU Partnership for Educational Renewal to participate in a pilot project to field test a series of in-service training modules. The modules are all user friendly, proactive, and cover a wide range of topics from confronting traditional “wives” tales, to risk factors and differences with warning signs, to co-morbidity, to basic and intermediate assessment and referral, to prevention models, to grief and loss, and to cultural and diversity similarities and differences. Further information regarding the “train the trainer” sessions will be provided at the October 27 meeting of the MPER Governing Board.

For Further Information

Would you like more information on the School Mental Health Leadership Academy, or do you have questions on how you or other members of your district faculty and staff can become involved in the Academy or other Partnership programs (e.g., Teacher Release Program, Study Group and Teaching Inquiry Funding, Teaching Fellowship Program) and events? If so, contact:

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Additionally, the MPER web site provides extensive information on the history, composition, and mission of the Partnership. The site also includes detailed information on programs, publications, and a calendar of events and deadlines. Answers to many of your MPER questions are just a few simple mouse-clicks away: http://mper.missouri.edu/