

Youth Tout Alternative Ed's Benefits in Visit with Schools Superintendent Whiston



May 9, 2016 – In a rare opportunity, 40 alternative education students from the Houghton Lake area met privately with State Superintendent of Schools Brian Whiston this month to advocate for a program they say has given them a life-affirming second chance at a high school education.

One by one, they recounted the merits of their program, run through Houghton Lake Community Education, where many have found academic success and restored self-esteem after personal hardship and often years of failure in traditional schools. They described the benefits of small class sizes and personalized attention, teachers respect of students, and a supportive and welcoming environment where educators routinely “go above and beyond” to help students learn.

“I really wish more schools were like that. Some kids can’t learn in big classroom settings where they throw up words, say learn this, and move on,” said student Erika Smith during the 25-minute conversation in the State Board Room at the Michigan Department of Education (MDE).

Michigan’s Children facilitated the conversation with the Superintendent and MDE staff to coincide with a trip to Lansing for the group supported by a donation from a local Rotary Club. Where students fall behind because of personal and educational obstacles, there are too few alternatives for recovering and earning credits needed for a high school diploma. In Michigan,

alternative high schools are more often closing due to local and intermediate district cost constraints than opening and in many regions they are too few and far between.

“A lot of people are down on alternative education. But it’s where you can get caught up with your work,” said student Justin Lee. Justin said he feels more at home at the Houghton program than at his previous high school. “I used to have like max, two friends; now I have a roomful of them.”

Said student Crystal Anklam, “This school really helps you to mature and learn responsibility. It’s helped me a lot.”

Whiston encouraged comments from the students, and took notes throughout the meeting. He treated the meeting with the students like he treats meetings with other experts who come to talk with him, with the same respect and candor, tying their recommendations to what the MDE is working on with the Top 10 in 10 conversation and his clear passion for promoting individualized learning options.

Whiston stepped into the role as head of the MDE last July. He has a record for supporting competency-based education like alternative education programs which values non-traditional ways to award academic credit needed for a high school diploma.

Teacher Theresa McMunigal is a six-year teacher at the school and accompanied her students to Lansing. The program is an option for students, ages 14 to 20, who have fallen behind in accumulating school credits for a variety of reasons that interrupt their schooling, she said. Some have been challenged because of frequent moves; many have been victims of abuse and neglect; some dropped out because of a pregnancy. The school has an on-site nursery for those teen parents. Because of these challenges, educators in alternative education work hard to rebuild trust with students who have become guarded and discouraged, McMunigal added.

“A lot of times alternative education students feel they don’t have a voice; having an opportunity like the visit with Superintendent Whiston really validates,” she said. “To be asked their opinion and interact with someone of authority like that and where they shine really is so wonderful for them.

“They realize their thoughts and beliefs do matter. They realized it was an important opportunity to explain why a standard four-year high school experiences isn’t for everyone,” McMunigal added.