

Schools line up for 'small high school' funding

By Lorie A. Shane, Tue., February 3, 2009 Printer-Friendly | E-mail This Article | Comment On This Article

Thirty schools or proposed schools want to be part of Michigan's "small high school" initiative, saying they would use grant funding for such things as career academies, themed schools-within-schools or ninth grade transition programs.

Both conventional public schools and charter public schools are among the preliminary applicants, with a number of charter operators looking to expand from K-8 to high school. Several organizations are asking for funding to open new charter schools altogether.

The schools are competing for a piece of the \$15 million 21st Century Schools Fund created by the state Legislature in 2008. The point of the fund, as Gov. Jennifer Granholm outlined it a year ago in her state of the state address, is **to replace what some see as large, failing, impersonal high schools with smaller environments that focus on "rigor, relevance and relationships."**

Only failing schools — defined as those with graduation rates below 70 percent — may apply for the money. Schools can receive up to \$3 million, paid over four years, but have to put up matching funds.

They also must limit enrollment to 110 students per grade and are supposed to pay back half the money if they don't turn in **an 80/80 performance — an 80 percent graduation rate within three years, with 80 percent of graduates enrolling in postsecondary education.**



Benton Harbor school district construction students spent Volunteer Day painting an area soup kitchen. The students are enrolled in the district's Science and Engineering Academy.

Twelve conventional public school districts started the formal application process by filing a "readiness assessment" with the Michigan Department of Education, among them Detroit, Grand Rapids, Lansing and Flint. Twelve existing charter public schools and six organizations that want to open new charter schools also have filed paperwork. (Charter schools can qualify on the basis of the graduation rate in the conventional school district where most of their students live.)

There are, however, several caveats: Schools that want the money have to work with outside experts, agree to site-based management and agree to spend 5 percent of the money on evaluations.

"We're hoping to have at least a small group (of small schools) that's ready to open next fall," Sally Vaughn, the state education department's chief academic officer, told state board members. "But this is going to be much more of a negotiati kind of process."

FOUNDATION BUY-IN

The state is counting on charitable organizations to put up the matching funds that the grant requires, but Superintendent of Public Instruction Michael Flanagan told state board of education members in October that those

organizations "have made it clear they would not be involved if there wasn't site-based management."

Site-based management generally means giving small school leaders the authority to make final decisions on staff, budget priorities and programming, up to and including giving the principal authority to hire and fire staff.

The MDE has asked applicants for a written statement of commitment to site-based management signed by their respective superintendents and teacher union presidents, though only a handful provided that document with their initial readiness assessments, according to a review of the proposals by Michigan Education Report. Some of the applicants do not have unionized employees.

"A district can choose not to apply if they can't get that agreement in-house," Flanagan told state board members. "The main reason we ended up putting it in the criteria is that it's not going to go anywhere with the foundations if we don't."

Without on-site authority, turnaround efforts can be "eviscerated" by personnel or policy changes dictated from outside the school, according to the head of a separate high school reform effort in Michigan. Michael Tenbusch, who heads the Greater Detroit Education Venture Fund for the United Way of Southeastern Michigan, said research shows that successful high school reform rests in part on strong principals.

Launched this year, the Venture Fund is awarding grants of up to \$320,000 for reform efforts in southeast Michigan high schools that posted graduation rates lower than 60 percent for three consecutive years. It also requires grantees to adopt site-based management.

"That principal has to be relentless," Tenbusch told Michigan Education Report in a telephone interview, but added that principals can't work in isolation. **Principals, teachers and staff must see reform as a joint mission, he said.**

OUTSIDE EXPERTS

The state also is calling on schools to name outside experts as partners in reform.

Some districts already have consultants. In its readiness assessment, Benton Harbor Area Schools reported it is working with Johns Hopkins University, while the Plymouth Educational Center, a Detroit charter authorized by Central Michigan University, said it partnered with both the High Tech High School network and Edvision Network Schools to develop its new Plymouth Preparatory High School. Several years in the planning, Plymouth Prep opened to freshmen this year and will add a grade year.

Plymouth is committed to the small-school approach in any case, according to Jesse Kilgore Jr., the chief academic officer, but receiving grant money would make implementation easier. Kilgore said a key element of the model is assigning an adult adviser to each student.



Allied Health II students practice nursing skills in classes at the Benton Harbor Area Schools Science and Engineering Academy. All Benton Harbor students select a career pathway by tenth grade, but career exploration begins much earlier.



Benton Harbor 'Teacher Cadets' served as activity leaders for visiting third-graders during a career exploration activity day. The older students are enrolled in Benton Harbor's Human Services Academy.

"If one of our kids is absent, we're on the phone right away," Kilgore said. Teachers "have to be more than the traditional high school educator."

The 21st Century Schools Fund is not Michigan's first venture into small school models. Thirteen Michigan school districts have received federal "Smaller Learning Communities" grants totaling \$15 million over the past 10 years.

Benton Harbor, a 21st Century Schools applicant, is already a Smaller Learning Communities recipient. It is using an \$848,000 grant to continue implementing a career pathway approach to high school in which all ninth graders attend a separate academy, while older students enroll in one of three career-based academies, according to Carole Fetke, dean of the Science and Engineering Academy. Each academy incorporates Michigan's core graduation requirements, career classes aligned with student interests, and a teaching staff dedicated to that academy, she said.

Beginning this year, Benton Harbor also matched each student with an adviser who remains that student's mentor until graduation, she said.

"That person is their in-school mom and dad," Fetke said.

Academically, Benton Harbor students who are below grade level in math and English often do double time in those subjects to catch up, she said, even as the district has pushed some of its curriculum down to the middle school to make sure that freshmen are prepared for algebra 1. Teachers and others spent a year planning the new system and continue to work with consultants from the Johns Hopkins Talent Development High School program, Fetke said.

Whether the changes will bring about better scores on the Michigan Merit Exam, a higher graduation rate and students who are better prepared for college is still a question, she said, but "our anecdotal evidence is clear that this is the way to do business," she told Michigan Education Report.

The district will undergo an external evaluation this spring.

Elsewhere in Michigan, a consortium of six high schools jointly received a \$3.6 million federal grant, and could receive more if their work shows results. The six — two in Grand Rapids, two in Traverse City, and one each in Muskegon and Marquette — were brought together by the Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools and continue to work jointly on planning and implementation of small learning communities, according to Jim Bodrie, project director and a coalition staff member.

The schools have set a goal of preparing every student to succeed in a postsecondary setting — college, community college, career training — without the need for remediation, Bodrie told Michigan Education Report in a telephone interview.

To do that, he said, the schools have set these priorities: put rigorous courses in place; make sure students are at grade level in math and English by the end of their sophomore year; personalize the education experience; increase participation in International Baccalaureate and dual enrollment programs, and track evidence of postsecondary enrollment.

Students who are below grade level might need to take classes outside regular school hours, attend summer school or, like their Benton Harbor peers, double up in certain subjects, Bodrie said. Teachers from the six districts, meanwhile, are sharing ideas on such things as aligning curriculum with state standards, incorporating "real world" content into subject matter, moving away from lecture format and toward project-based learning, and fostering higher level thinking skills among students, Bodrie said.

The consortium also supports use of "advisories," in which students meet regularly in the same small groups with an adult who gets to know that group well, he said, giving each student a personal connection with the school.

As Bodrie and Fetke make clear, "small schools" is not just about the numbers.

"It's about size, but if you stop there you can easily fall short," Bodrie said.

MIXED RESULTS

"Small schools" as a reform strategy has gotten its fair share of attention and funding in the past decade, but does it work?

The National High School Center, a research clearinghouse sponsored by the American Institutes for Research, summed up major findings on smaller learning communities by saying that "research indicates that the impact of SLCs is neither definitive nor clear."

The federal government program, for example, found mixed results among its earliest grant recipients. An independent evaluation released in May said that high school that received funding did create smaller, more intimate learning environments. More students passed ninth grade; more participated in extracurricular activities and more said they planned to attend college. But the results showed no major change in academic achievement on state tests or college entrance exams.

Similarly, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation pumped \$1 billion to \$2 billion into small schools ventures across the country beginning in 2001. They also reported increased attendance and participation, but not demonstrably better learning.

Baltimore's "innovation" high schools, however, reported better attendance and test scores than the city's traditional comprehensive high schools, the High School Center noted.

In Michigan, Bodrie said he hopes members of his consortium can tease out what works and share their findings.

"There's enough information out there to indicate we're headed in the right direction," he said. "We hope to be a contributing resource to other Michigan schools."

####

Lorie Shane is the managing editor of the Michigan Education Report, the Mackinac Center's education policy journal. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided that Michigan Education Report is properly cited.

Related Topics: Education, Funding

Printer-Friendly | E-mail This Article | Comment On This Article