

'At Night' classes for troubled Bridgeport students shut down

By John Burgeson, STAFF WRITER
Thursday, January 21, 2010

BRIDGEPORT ---- For several years, local high schools have had a so-called "At Night" program for students with poor attendance and behavioral problems.

Now, these after-school classes will essentially be shut down beginning Monday after complaints about their apparent illegality, as well as lack of academic standards.

The Center for Children's Advocacy investigated At Night after concerns were prompted by teen clients in the program, according to a statement issued Thursday by CCA. The private agency contends the program was not meeting state academic requirements for high school instruction, and it also said that problem students were being shifted to At Night without due process.

Attempts to contact several Bridgeport school administrators were not successful Thursday, but one school system employee, who did not want to be identified, confirmed that the At Night program will essentially be discontinued in its current form next week.

"Most of the students referred to these programs did not believe they had any choice in the matter," said CCA lawyer Josh Michtom, "and they didn't know that they were not receiving the education they are entitled to by law."

Each of the city's three high schools had an At Night program. Classes took place on most days from 4 to about 8 p.m., and some took place Saturdays. But instead of classroom lessons, students received instruction on a computer. These lessons were self-paced; teachers were on hand only as advisers.

"Legally speaking, it was substandard," Michtom said. "The state requires 900 hours of high school instruction, but the At Night programs were providing a maximum of 612 hours. It's just too hard to squeeze in another school day after the school day."

CCA advocates said that many, if not most, At Night students drifted off, owing to the lack of supervision. "It wasn't the standard model of a teacher in front of the classroom engaging the students," Michtom said.

CCA said that when it monitored the Harding High School At Night sessions, for example, of the 110 students enrolled, "only about 20 showed up on any given night."

Furthermore, At Night lacked components required in day school instruction, such as foreign language and physical education, he said.

But Michtom said he's pleased with the school administration's response to the CCA complaint. "As soon as we approached them, they immediately placed a moratorium on new referrals," he said, adding that the decision to end the program, as it was configured, came soon after that.

Her said that when he and Connecticut Legal Services lawyer Catherine Williams met with assistant school superintendents Denise Clemons and John Di Donato, the matter was quickly acted upon.

At Night will still exist, but only to give students lagging in their studies a chance to catch up. These students will still take the usual daytime classes, Michtom said.

"The plan is to keep it in place for credit recovery and, as such, it will be additional, instead of in place of the day high school," he said.

The At Night program is distinct from the city's Department of Adult Education, which offers both daytime classes and well as night classes at Central High.

Most of the adult ed students are over 18 years old; a few are 16 and 17 years old, however. Students under 18 can attend adult ed classes only with their parents' permission.

The computer teaching program used by At Night was published by NovaNET in Upper Saddle River, N.J.

"NovaNET gives students the option to work independently on courses through online delivery for anytime, anyplace at any pace instruction. NovaNET offers a true second chance to students who connect better in a digital environment than they did in the traditional classroom," the company says in an online promotional brochure.

According to the NovaNET Web site, 34 Central High School seniors who worked with the computer program successfully graduated in the 2006-07 academic year.

Students now enrolled in At Night are being counseled and reassigned back into day classes, CCA said.

© 2010 Hearst Communications Inc.

..