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State Leaders: Our Most Vulnerable Students Need Your Help!

March 2, 2012

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On a cold day last year, 17-year-old Manuel made the 2-mile walk to his high school in one of Connecticut's lowest performing school districts. When he arrived, a vice principal told him that he was not allowed in the building during the day and he should come back at 3:30 p.m. when the alternative, at-night program was to begin.

Although Manuel had attended high school for 2 ½ years, he had accumulated zero credits and was reading on a third-grade level. Ridden with feelings of failure and defeat, Manuel constantly thought about dropping out. Because of his poor attendance, his school's administration told him that he was required to attend the alternative, at-night program, a program which provided only four hours of education per day to students and did not provide the full range of academic course offerings. Although his mother was furious that she had not been consulted before the school had refused entry to her son, she did not know how to make sure that his educational needs were appropriately addressed.

In another school district, James, who had spent the last five years in a therapeutic day school, had the opportunity to attend an alternative high school program of his choice. The school was smaller than his local high school but less restrictive than the therapeutic day school he was attending. He could supplement his academic courses with vocational activities. The staff and students in the school really wanted to be there.

Manuel and James are not the real names of these two students, but their stories are true. Their experiences highlight the variation and inconsistency between alternative schools and programs in Connecticut. Alternative schools exist in many school districts and can play a valuable role for students who require nontraditional modes of instruction. However, Connecticut laws do not define or regulate these programs, failing to ensure that all students in these programs receive adequate educational opportunities.

The State Department of Education (SDE) does not provide any oversight to alternative schools or programs, nor does it require any reporting of their achievement data. Consequently, many of the schools and programs operate without the supervision and accountability required of traditional schools. In fact, no one in our state really knows how many of these alternative schools exist. Districts often move students into alternative schools or programs without parental consent, and sometimes also refuse to allow students to return to traditional schools from these programs. Many alternative schools do not offer their students the same number of class hours or course offerings that regular public schools require, thus denying vulnerable students access to the quantity and quality of education that they deserve. While some alternative schools help students succeed towards graduation, others become "dumping grounds" for vulnerable students, accelerating the flow of students dropping out of school. Although these tactics are often illegal, without oversight and accountability for these alternative schools, many students and families do not know how to protect their educational rights.

During what Gov. Malloy has called the "Year of Education," our legislature has the ability to ensure that alternative schools and programs provide viable and real opportunities for student success. To do this, our legislature needs to take one simple step: Amend Senate Bill No. 24, An Act Concerning Educational Achievement, to

ensure that we no longer ignore the educational achievement of students who have not succeeded in traditional high schools. Senate Bill No. 24 must be amended to:

- Require that the SDE develops a definition for alternative schools and programs and implements data collection for these programs, so that districts are accountable for the performance of these often invisible schools and programs;
- Establish standardized processes for enrollment of students in alternative schools and programs, to include informed parental consent, ensuring that students are being placed in a thoughtful and equitable way; and
- Mandate class hours and course offerings, ensuring that alternative students will have access to the same depth and breadth of education as their peers in regular public schools.

Manuel and James can both succeed. However, without basic protections, students like Manuel will continue to be pushed out of our education system. For far too long, we have failed these students by not holding ourselves accountable for their educational opportunity and achievement. The legislature must take this opportunity to level the playing field for Connecticut students and fully develop Connecticut's workforce for tomorrow.

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