

Alternative program makes changes

By DANIELLE CAPALBO Hour Staff Writer Oct 2011

STAMFORD -- The alternative learning program in Stamford has welcomed a new facility, expanded courses and implemented tighter guidelines for enrollment this year, with help, in part, from two attorneys.

"We had seen a troubling pattern with some of our clients in the program," said Kathryn Meyer from the Center for Children's Advocacy. When she and Jillian Griswold from Connecticut Legal Services, reviewed the program -- called Alternatives Routes to Success (ARTS) -- they said they uncovered "systematic issues."

At least 25 percent of the students in the program were eligible for special education services, although ARTS did not receive that sort of funding. Other teenagers who simply needed extra attention in their mainstream classrooms had been "pushed" into the program, they said, making ARTS a potential "dumping ground."

In a letter to school officials dated April 21, Meyer and Griswold said that "some aspects and procedures of the program are potentially in violation of state and federal law."

"I reacted very favorably, because I know their work," said Mike Meyer, the director of pupil services for Stamford Public Schools. The letter could have seemed disparaging, he said, yet it provided "a good nudge. The way we took it was, 'Let's work together and do what's best for the kids,'" he said.

Recommendations were forthcoming, as well: That referrals be stringent, that parents be well-informed, that laws for truancy be enforced and that students with special needs receive adequate services. "They already knew about the issues, and they were concerned," Kathryn Meyer said. "They just needed a nudge in the right direction." After a series of hearings with school officials, changes have been made, she said.

The program, which serves hundreds of children throughout Stamford, opened a new facility on Fairfield Avenue this year, consolidating two sites and creating a more stable environment.

"It never really felt like a home before," Mike Meyer said. "It allowed us to pool our resources, therefore improving the quality of the program." And with "instrumental help" from the attorneys, Mike Meyer said the school system established a new referral process, as well. "It is not an obstacle to the school and is consistent with parental rights," he said.

The curriculum will soon be expanded to include advanced placement courses and after-school culinary programs. "We want to inspire their interest in coming to school, in learning," he said.

Before their work with Meyer and Griswold, he said the school system had already begun its forward stride, hiring a supervisor for ARTS, Kevin Durkin. "That was a big plus," Meyer said. "It allowed the district to focus on the program, which works with the most marginalized kids."

Boosting the program means reaching those students, he said -- teenagers with behavioral issues or truancy problems. "It helps me to be more responsible, to be in school every day," said Karol Saavedra, 16, who joined the program last year.

Born in Colombia and raised in Stamford, Saavedra grappled with success at Rippowam Middle School. Now, she looks forward to math class and attending college someday. She would eventually like to become a pediatrician.

"Alternative schools can provide an opportunity for students who are not successful in the regular school environment," Griswold said.