

One year later, will the governor's education reform priorities hold?

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Norwalk -- Gov. Dannel P. Malloy is asking legislators to fully fund one of his major education reform initiatives: ensuring that the state intervenes in more low-achieving Connecticut schools next year. "We are going to move forward," the Democratic governor said during a tour of Richard Briggs Alternative High School. It is one of many schools seeking help from the state.

But what about all the other education reforms signed into law nine months ago?

Malloy was noncommittal when asked whether he would be seeking state funding to help with the implementation of new teacher evaluations, the national Common Core curriculum, and support for other changes passed into law for needy districts. "More information will come out in the coming days about how we will move forward with those reforms," Malloy said. He did say that education remains a priority.

If more education cuts are recommended to help close the \$1.2 billion deficit facing the state next fiscal year, it wouldn't be the first time the \$88.2 million education reform package would be cut since lawmakers celebrated its passage last spring. Malloy and legislators this winter cut education funding by \$19.9 million to help close a mid-year budget deficit. Those cuts included trimming back funding for the rollout of new teacher evaluations tied to student performance, charter school reimbursements and for increasing enrollment in preschool programs.

The cuts also included \$2.8 million -- a 37 percent reduction -- for the Commissioner's Network -- schools where the state intervenes in an effort to improve student performance. Currently in its inaugural year, the state is picking up the cost for reforms like longer school days or new technology in four schools across the state.

Malloy said this year's budget setback isn't going to stop him from moving forward with fully funding the existing four schools and adding at least six new schools to the network next year. He is proposing that the legislature provide \$14.1 million to fund the initiative and also have some additional funding for construction and technology renovations.

"We did important work last year... We are going to fund education reform," he said.

A school in need of help

On any given school day at Richard Briggs Alternative High School, one-quarter of Sandra Faioes's class is absent. "It is typical to have kids out. I think that is part of our issue," the reading teacher said after Malloy visited her classroom last Friday. "Students aren't learning if they're not here."

These absences and high dropout rates -- coupled with high rates of teen pregnancy and drug abuse among the students -- are all major challenges school officials say they face.

Additionally, an audit in the summer of 2011 by Norwalk's central office found that the school was socially promoting students and misusing funds. The district nearly closed the school entirely, the superintendent said, but instead decided to create a plan to overhaul how it operates.

That's where they hope the state comes in. School and district officials say they hope Briggs will be named a Commissioner's Network school, a classification that comes with state funding to implement changes approved by the education commissioner.

Malloy told a class struggling with reading comprehension that he would like to see an extended school day. It currently ends around 2 p.m. for many of them. "I want you to be here until 5 p.m. I don't want you to leave so early," he told the students. After sharing his years-long struggle with dyslexia and reading comprehension -- an issue that lasted into college -- Malloy said it is inexcusable that so many students are still struggling with the issue by high school.

"Work hard. It's going to come. It's going to happen," he told one class. But for many students it doesn't happen, with one out of every three not making it to graduation, according to the most recent State Department of Education data.

Angela Tudisco, a Briggs's counselor, said one major obstacle with getting students to school is that it does not provide transportation. Instead, students are expected to get to school by using public transportation. For Alex Rincon, a junior at Briggs, the lack of transportation means he has to take two city buses and spend 45 minutes getting to school every morning. "We are still working on students getting here. It is a problem," Tudisco said.

The school also allows students to miss a high number of classes without automatically losing credit. Briggs students can miss up to eight classes a quarter -- about 20 percent -- and still receive full credit. At the nearby traditional high schools, students are allowed to miss just three days a quarter, Tudisco said.

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Reforms looming for all alternative schools?

Because students most at risk of dropping out are typically the ones referred to alternate schools, legislators are lining up to change how these schools operate. A handful of bills have been introduced to increase reporting requirements and educational standards. It's a move Malloy said he supports.

"As long as we are measuring progress, I have no problem with that at all," he said, adding, though that it would not be fair to compare an alternative school serving a very different population with others.

Education advocates say there are several schools in the state where districts funnel their worst students and do nothing to make sure they are attending quality programs.

"We need to know how these schools are doing. We have no idea right now," said Leon Smith, the director of the Alternative Schools Project associated with the University of Connecticut's Center for Children Advocacy. The problem, he said, is that there is no definition in the law of what is considered a "school" and that alternative "programs" are not bound by public school reporting requirements.

"Alternative programs are not held to the same standards," Smith said. Two examples are the Twilight Program in Bridgeport and Enlightenment Program in Waterbury.

There are also concerns that students are being pressured to leave their traditional school or risk expulsion. Smith's suggestion is to require a bill of student's rights that a student and their parent must receive and sign so they know the transfer is voluntary and not required.

Alex Ortega, a senior at Briggs, said he never felt pressured to leave Norwalk High School. "It was more of a suggestion than [my counselor] saying, 'You have to go,'" he said, adding he was not headed down a good path before coming to Briggs. He now has a near-perfect grade point average.

Malloy said he wants to be able to offer more potential drop-outs or those that would thrive in smaller classrooms an opportunity at Briggs. "We need to expand the menu of opportunities," he said, adding he wants the school's enrollment to continue to expand to capture these students.

If the school is named a network school, that may be possible, district officials said.

Moving forward, waiting for news on funding

With last Friday's announcement, seven schools have been given the nod by the State Department of Education to move forward with developing formal plans on what reforms they want to make.

This year's applicants for the state's help will include Bridgeport's Paul Laurence Dunbar School, New Britain's DiLoreto Magnet School, Norwalk's Richard Briggs Alternate High School, Waterbury's Crosby High School and Walsh Elementary School, Windham's middle school and several schools in New Haven. (Read the letters of interest here.)

Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor has the authority to intervene in up to 25 schools over the next two years, but will need the legislature to appropriate money to implement the agreed upon changes.

While superintendents and school boards in the state's lowest-performing districts have overwhelmingly supported state oversight, union leaders have been apprehensive.

When designated a Network School, a teacher union's ability to bargain can be significantly restricted if the commissioner and local board-appointed members of a "turn-around committee" cannot agree on a plan. Instead, for the first time, the law provides for a single arbitrator to "give the highest priority to the educational interests" when settling a dispute of what to include in a school's turnaround plan.

Pryor said in "most cases, it will be unlikely" that an agreement will not be reached. By law, Pryor can reject a proposed turn-around plan and send it to the arbitrator. Last year, Hartford's Milner Elementary School turnaround plan to be run by a local charter school was two days away from heading to arbitration, legislators on the Executive and Legislative Nominations Committee were told two weeks ago by an arbitrator.

Formal turn-around plans are expected this spring and a decision of which schools will receive state oversight will be made by early this summer.

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