

## **Alternative High Schools Operate with Little State Oversight**

By Linda Tishler Levinson

In the ongoing discussion over alternative high schools in Connecticut, it appears the local school districts hold all the cards with little or no oversight by the state.

Kelly Donnelly, spokesperson for Department of Education Commissioner Steven Pryor confirmed that viewpoint when asked by CTLatinoNews. “Generally, educational programs, such as alternate programs, are designed by local boards of education. Accordingly, the programs fall under the purview of the local board of education and are subject to the local accountability system,” she said in a statement. In effect, these programs are operating outside the purview of state oversight.

The state doesn’t require school districts to file strategic school profiles, which provide in-depth data on every school in a district, on alternative high schools. Some districts, like East Hartford do, while others, like Windsor don’t.

The state’s Latino legislators have introduced a bill calling for a definition for an alternative school. Raised House Bill 6504, originally introduced by state Rep. Jason Rojas, D-East Hartford, the state’s nine other Latino representatives and state Sen. Andres Ayala, D-Bridgeport, also calls for clarity on what these schools offer students.

According to Rojas, the initiative came out of talks he had with the Center for Children’s Advocacy. He said some alternative school programs are high quality, but others are not. Since the state does not track their success, it is hard to know what is happening.

“How do we know that they’re quality programming?” Rojas asked. Rojas said that one concern is whether minority students are disproportionately referred to alternative school programs. “It’s hard to know whether that is the case,” he said. The state currently has no guidelines for alternative high school programs and does not keep statistics on those programs.

As Madelyn Colon, political columnist for CTLatinoNews, reported previously, “Currently, if a school district describes the alternative school as a ‘program’ and not a ‘school,’ it is not obligated to give the state any information. Apparently local school districts have taken advantage of that loophole.”

East Hartford did a strategic school profile for its Stevens Alternative High School. Its demographic profile for its 117 students in October 2009 (the latest year available) shows that 48 (41%) were Hispanic, 40 (34.2%) were Black, 26 (22.2%) were White and 3 (2.6%) were Asian. East Hartford High School is 35.8% Black, 35.2% Hispanic, 23.1% White and 5.7% Asian. East Hartford does not have a Strategic School Profile for its other alternative high school.

And no matter the demographics of these school programs, Rojas said, the sponsoring legislators want to know the quality of the education offered.

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That was the problem encountered by one girl, an honor student and on the basketball team at Windsor High School. As a sophomore, she got into a fight with another girl at school and was suspended. She was recommended for expulsion but then placed in Windsor's alternative high school. Her mother, April Madden, recalled that her daughter, whose name is being withheld to protect her identity, was presented with what Madden described as the same level work as her younger brother, who was then a seventh-grader. "They couldn't teach her there," Madden said.

The girl fell into a deep depression and dropped out of school, her mother said. "Once they put her there, everything went downhill," Madden said. She is now 22 years old and receiving treatment for her depression.

"I can't comment on six years ago," said Jody Lefkowitz, director of pupil and special education services for the Windsor Public Schools. But Lefkowitz did say that Windsor in the past few years has worked to make the curriculum at its alternative program adhere to that of Windsor High School. "We've made lots of changes since six years ago," she said.

East Hartford, too, has been re-evaluating its two alternative high school programs, Superintendent of Schools Nathan Quesnel said but not from the perspective there were problems. He said it was part of a periodic assessment. The Transitional Education program in East Hartford is "a very therapeutic program," Quesnel said, and is aimed at students who need emotional or behavioral support.

The Synergy School, he said, is for "students who have not met with success in a traditional high school." While the program is different, the students graduating from the Synergy School do receive an East Hartford High School diploma. Currently, the school system is looking at the program to make sure it offers what each child needs. Educators there are also looking at partnerships with Goodwin College.

While much may have changed, those changes are hard to track — in Windsor, East Hartford and across Connecticut. While there are no state guidelines on alternative schools, Windsor's Lefkowitz said, there are national standards, which Windsor is working to adhere to.

The National Alternative Education Association has established criteria in 10 areas, including mission and purpose, leadership, climate and culture, staffing and professional development, student assessment, transitional planning and support, parent involvement, collaboration and program evaluation.

"The alternative education program ensures that all students have access to the academic core curriculum," the association's report states. It also specifies that teachers should be highly qualified in the content area based on state educational standards.

"The proponents of this bill have identified an important issue. The reporting requirements and accountability mechanisms for alternative schools need to be examined. The Department of Education looks forward to working with stakeholders and advocates on this issue," said Donnelly, director of communications and community partnerships for the state Department of Education.