

OP-ED

Make Alternative Schools Accountable

By LEON SMITH
The Hartford Courant
May 24, 2013

A bill pending in the General Assembly aimed at making alternative schools, which are virtually unregulated and failing to serve some of our most vulnerable students, accountable should be passed.

Far too many students in Connecticut are falling behind and dropping out due to being pushed out of mainstream high schools and relegated to substandard alternative school programs. They receive or are entitled to receive special education services, are behind multiple grade levels in reading, and grapple with social and familial difficulties. Yet the state does little to ensure that these alternative school programs provide the education these students so desperately deserve.

Currently, alternative schools operate without public scrutiny. By exempting alternative school programs from reporting requirements, the state Department of Education lacks even the simplest information about them, such as how many exist and how many students they serve. This has led to a vast disparity in the quality of alternative school programs, with some providing a needed safety net for struggling students and others providing a second-rate, low-quality educational experience.

But the problem is bigger than a few data points. Some students at a Connecticut alternative school report that their teachers supply them with test answers rather than teaching subject matter in order to “get them out” quicker. Others sit alone at computers with little to no instruction, their requests for assistance ignored by disengaged teachers. One program even allows students to openly “Google” test answers. A parent of one student states that a school administrator failed to send a consent form home for her son’s placement in an alternative program and transferred him without her approval. Sadly, these stories are not exceptions.

Once in subpar programs, some students are ushered through to the end with little real knowledge or skills while others are warehoused until they are old enough to drop out. Ill-prepared for career or college, these youth face a heightened risk of unemployment and incarceration. This isn’t good for them, and it isn’t good for any of us.

Not all alternative school programs are failing their students. Some feature dedicated administrators and faculty who are committed to providing needed structure and a quality education to needy students. But without state accountability, alternative school programs are left unsupervised and free to make their own standards — at times for better, but often, for worse. This needs to change. No state-funded school should be allowed to fly under the radar, using state taxpayer dollars without accountability, and no students should be invisible to the State Department of Education.

The bill “An Act Concerning Alternative School Programs” addresses these issues by providing an immediate and thorough study and evaluation of alternative school programs in Connecticut. This study will examine factors like alternative schools’ enrollment criteria, curriculum, length of the school day and year, attendance and truancy rates, graduation rates and student academic performance. Most important, it requires the state Department of Education to submit a report on its findings and recommendations to the legislature by February 2014. This study is a critical first step in bringing alternative school programs into the light and reducing the achievement gap for students in these schools.

Exempting any publicly-funded school from requirements that support quality education for students is unconscionable, and has negative, long-term effects on individuals, families, communities, and our economy. Certainly a study, alone, will not solve a broken system but it will bring to light what is and isn’t working and provide a roadmap for closing this particular achievement gap. We are deeply invested in the outcome of the vote on this legislation and its implications for our state’s most vulnerable students.

Leon Smith, a lawyer, is director of the Alternative Schools Reform Project at the Center for Children’s Advocacy in Hartford and Bridgeport.