

NEW HAVEN REGISTER

Connecticut study aims to track ‘invisible’ alternative schools

By Rachel Chinapen, New Haven Register
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When Jessica Rivera’s teenage son begged her to allow him to drop out of high school and enroll in an adult education program, it broke her heart.

“My son was coming home for two weeks begging me to go to adult ed,” Rivera said. “We would get into a verbal argument. I said you’re not going to adult ed, over my dead body, that is a setup, that is a double drop out, that’s for you to fail. I’m not allowing that.”

Jesus Valle, 17, a former student at New Horizons School, said he received no support for his coursework while at New Horizons. Instead, Valle said staff would show him his transcript, and that he was failing, and he had only three credits.

“You have no credits, look at your grades; you think you’re gonna graduate? You should just go to adult ed.” Rivera recalled her son telling her he was told by staff.

“They didn’t help my child,” Rivera said. “They killed his spirit. They broke him down. His self-esteem was so low; he would come home and tell me, ‘Mom, I’m dumb, I’m stupid, I’m not going to graduate. I’m not going to do anything.’”

“To hear my son come home on a daily basis to say that to me tormented me,” she said.

Valle is one of an unknown number of alternative education students in the state. The state Department of Education doesn’t have hard numbers on how many alternative education schools and programs exist across Connecticut, or how many students they serve, something recent legislation seeks to correct.



(Photo by Peter Hvizdak — New Haven Register) High school students practice meditation Friday morning January 10, 2014 at the New Horizons School in New Haven.

In New Haven, about 160 students attend one of New Haven Public Schools’ alternative programs: Dixwell New Light, New Horizons, DOMUS and Polly McCabe. Reports of the Dixwell New Light and New Horizons facilities paint pictures of decaying walls, lax security, outdated materials and overall, limited resources. The need for improvements in the schools are often met with resource and funding challenges, although the district continues to explore ways to better serve its most vulnerable students.

Superintendent Garth Harries said each alternative education program in New Haven has a “slightly different emphasis and population” but all serve “students that have not been successful in the mainstream environment.”

“The conventional education, we already know, hasn’t worked for these students,” he said.

Center for Children’s Advocacy’s Alternative Schools Project Director Leon Smith said alternative schools and their students are often the “invisible schools” and “invisible students.”

“Everyone knows Connecticut has an achievement gap but this is one of the clearest manifestations of an achievement gap when you look at your public schools versus your alternative schools,” he said.

Smith said students in high performing schools receive “a great detail of resources” while students who face difficulties in urban areas, who are “almost exclusively of color,” don’t have nearly the same level of resources.

Smith visited New Horizons and Dixwell New Light in May 2013 to observe the school as part of the center's project to reform alternative education. Smith said he found a lack of full-time social workers and school nurses, poor security, poor IT support and outdated textbooks. In Dixwell New Light he said he found no security cameras or buzzer lock system for the doors.

Rivera said she was never contacted by a social worker while Valle was at New Horizons. Anytime Valle was struggling or if he pulled his phone out, Rivera said, the teachers would put his desk out in the hallway and leave him to sit there.

"There's really no help... as much as they say there is..." Valle said.

Valle stopped attending New Horizons in late September and is now a student at Passages, a program ran by Innovation in Education.

"What sort of incentive are you giving to that kid who is clearly on that line of dropping out?" Smith asked. "When the environment is poor... they know they need to work on things that got them to that point, but they don't have that full-time person to provide that support?"

Harries said strengthening the schools and programs are an "important priority" for him as part of his work with disengaged students, but that the resources "have to come from somewhere." He said the schools serve particularly "needy populations" but "very small populations" which makes it a "difficult resource decision."

"If we're adding a social worker then we're taking it away from somewhere else," he said.

Statewide, the condition of alternative education is a result of both "data and oversight," Smith said.

The state Department of Education doesn't know for certain how many alternative education programs exist or how many students are in these programs, according to department bureau chief of the performance office, Ajit Gopalakrishnan.

The state is currently in the final stages of a study on alternative schools as a result of legislation supported by state Rep. Jason Rojas, D-East Hartford, and the Center for Children's Advocacy.

"The fact remains if these schools are increasing in number and in scope, I think we have a responsibility to make sure we're collecting appropriate data on them," Rojas said.

Rojas said the study is important in terms of making sure that students in alternative schools receive the same opportunities as do students in traditional school programs — even down to the details of whether an alternative education student can participate on sports teams.

The study is a full inventory of any type of alternative school or program in the state, Gopalakrishnan said. The department didn't visit any of the schools to conduct the study but sent surveys to every district asking for disclosure of any programs and how the programs operate.

Gopalakrishnan said the state collects data on every public school student in Connecticut. However, there is a loophole. If an alternative school is classified by a district as a "program," the information isn't tracked.

"There are instances where there are programs that are district run programs that are not part of the state data system, as a result of which, we don't have a completely precise sense of where every child is receiving instruction," Gopalakrishnan said.

Gopalakrishnan said there "isn't one clear definition" of what an alternative school is and "that's something the study is hoping to remedy."

Rojas said it is important to have a definition and statute that dictates what an alternative school is so there can be some consistency. He added there should be "flexibility on the local level," but at least a set of basic standards at the state level.

Smith said he is hopeful that the recommendations from the study will result in a definition of alternative schools by statute and the closing of any loophole so that data is collected from all alternative schools and programs.

“You take your vulnerable kids and you catch them and get them through,” Smith said. “We’re hoping the legislation can bring these schools out of the dark, put them into the light and give them the attention that they really need.”

Despite a lack of resources, Smith said he finds building level staff in alternative schools, both statewide and in New Haven, to be as “dedicated and committed as they can be.”

“You could put the best headmaster in the world in the school but when you don’t provide the resources and support, you don’t provide the social workers, the counselors that these kids need, it’s not necessarily on the building level staff,” he said. “It has to be true commitment backed up by the district.”

Harries said one example of what the alternative schools are doing is a new meditation program at New Horizons.

New Horizons Principal Maureen Bransfield started the voluntary, twice-a-day transcendental meditation program at her school to help students deal with the “social-emotional” stresses they face. She said while people often say alternative school students face “post-traumatic stress,” her students face “during-traumatic stress” because they never leave their environment. Bransfield said traditional therapies don’t usually work for her students because the students feel vulnerable, and in many cases won’t even go.

“It further disempowers them to say ‘Listen, you’re kind of broken, but I can help fix you,’” she said.

If a student is not prepared emotionally, Bransfield said they’re not going to digest what’s going on in the classroom. As of October, 52 of New Horizon’s 81 students took part in the daily meditation program.

It’s “wonderful,” Bransfield said. She said students are “more in control” now.

Harries said the program gives students the skills to “calm themselves down when they’re dealing with different situations, find the headspace to back up and strategize, and decide what actions are most appropriate for them.”

“Those are important skills in person and character development,” he said.

New Horizon student Marquell Wright, 20, said he finds the meditation program helpful because it teaches him to “think twice.”

“It just eases my mind,” he said. “I don’t worry about everything, it calms me down and then it makes me second think about a lot of things when I’m going to react.”

Overall, Wright said his experience at the school is positive and said he enjoys the “small learning community.” Wright said the staff at the school really works with him and help him and other students to find jobs.

On a broader school scale Harries said he recognizes the need to strengthen the way schools engage students. This year the district asked The Future Project to support New Horizons and Riverside, he said. The Future Project works with students to pursue their dreams and impact the world in doing so.

The district also has an online credit remediation program to allow students to catch up on credits. Harries said students can also work on independent projects to accelerate.

“There is ample room for criticism in these programs,” he said.

Smith said something that works is a collaboration with the community to provide support for students. He added, when kids are invested in their community they are less likely to drop out.

Smith said Valle’s story is an example of what happens when the right resources and social workers are in place. Valle is now an honors student at Passages and is job shadowing at the Farnam Neighborhood House. When he first found out he made honors he said he had his teacher send a picture of the award to Rivera.

“It wasn’t my child,” Rivera said. “He just needed guidance, the direction, positivity and compassion from the teachers. He went from literally Fs and in two to three months, he got honor roll and that was his first time.”