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State wants accountability from alternative schools

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By Linda Conner Lambeck

HARTFORD — There are hundreds of alternative education programs around the state, but education officials aren't sure if the programs are clearing the path to a high school diploma — or becoming dumping grounds that lead to more dropouts.

A new statewide survey of the programs has done little to answer the question. It has, however, spurred some state Board of Education members into action.

"We need to do something," said vice chairperson Theresa Hopkins-Staten, calling for an ad hoc committee to focus on the issue. "The lack of standards, the lack of continuity, the lack of fairness and the disproportionality of kids of color ... It's just a vicious cycle."

There has also been a call for new legislation. Raised Bill No. 5567, approved last week by the Education Committee and sent to the House, seeks to regulate and track alternative programs. State Sen. Toni Boucher, R-Wilton, said she is a staunch supporter of the measure because it would lead to better services for the state's most troubled youth. "What we have right now is a hodgepodge, " Boucher said.

The study of alternative schools was prompted by an act of the General Assembly and conducted this school year. The state Department of Education created a survey and sent it to all of Connecticut's school districts. The measure prompted an initial response from officials of 100 school districts. Another 14 districts responded after the report was written.

Alternative Education Programs Reported to State

Program type	How Many	Enrollment
Expulsion	20	258
Alternative	98	3144
Dropout Diversion	25	1206
Homebound	3	16
Special Education	130	2924
Transition	46	456
Total	**322***	**8,044**

* Another 55 programs from 14 communities were reported late to the state, including 5 expulsion only, 9 alternative, 13 drop out diversion, and 28 Special ed/transition.

Between the report and what data came in late, it appears there are 377 alternative education programs, serving more than 8,000 students. The number of students in the programs reported late was not available. The list includes a pile of programs for students with special needs, children who have been expelled and/or haven't fared well in conventional public school settings. Some are called dropout diversion or transition programs. A few others are for homebound students.

"It is a very messy area to try to put a ribbon around, " said Ajit Gopalakrishnan, chief of data collection, research and evaluation for the education department.

To a large extent, the state doesn't know who is enrolled in these programs, who the teachers are, how the programs are run or funded, and how the students are being taught. Some of the programs are embedded in regular schools, others exist in separate buildings, while some are run in conjunction with outside agencies. "We can't tell you if these programs are working, " Gopalakrishnan said. He, along with other members of the department, have suggested to the state board that a firmer identification system be used to track students and develop a more uniform operating system.

Most of the state's alternative education programs do not keep demographic information on students. Of the 14 alternative programs that did, 80 percent of the students in them were black or Hispanic, and 70 percent were males.While some state board members called the problem fixable and suggested that less fragmentation and more regionalization might cure its ills, others were clearly troubled.

"Are these dumping grounds?" Estela Lopez, a member of the state school board, asked rhetorically. She called the study very disconcerting. Lopez and other board members also want to know how many hours the programs operate and the extent to which parents have a say in the placement of their children.

Program success is also a gray area. A majority of districts report graduation rates from the programs greater than 80 percent, but the data is self-reported. What does seem clear is that the state's neediest school districts — the 30 so-called Alliance Districts — operate half of the state's alternative programs and 79 percent of dropout diversion programs.

Andrea Comer, another state board member, said the quality of programs is what concerns her. "If a child is sitting in a room for six hours, not having their needs met, it's not helpful, " Comer said. In some cases, it ap-

pears students spend a great deal fewer than six hours in alternative education programs.

The survey found at least 10 percent of students in alternative settings are receiving less than the state-required 900 hours of instruction annually. Fifteen or more of the programs run only in the evening, making a full school day unlikely for these students.

“Many students don’t even realize they are being shortchanged by these piecemeal, ad hoc programs, ” said Kathryn Meyer, a staff attorney for the Center for Children’s Advocacy, which provides free legal services to abused and neglected children.
The Center has done its own study on the state’s alternative schools. It found the lack of state oversight has led to schools that are understaffed, underfunded and subject to neglect.

One of the districts it focused on was Bridgeport, which runs after school Twilight programs at each of its main high schools. Students in the program do all of their coursework on computers.

The Center for Children’s Advocacy reported average daily attendance last year at the Bassick and Harding high school Twilight programs at under 50 percent. It also heard from participants of the Bassick Twilight program that said students regularly “Googled” answers to test questions.

“That was one of the more appalling things that we saw with our own eyes, ” said Leon Smith, director of the alternative schools project for the Center for Children’s Advocacy.

John Fabrizi, director of adult education for Bridgeport’s school district and the person charged with overseeing alternative education, said steps have been taken to prevent students from cheating. He also said of the city’s three Twilight programs, Bassick is the one where issues still exist.

Michael Testani, assistant director of adult education, said daily attendance at all three schools has also improved. This year, it ranges from 59 percent at Bassick to 78 percent at Central.

Smith, who has been working with the school district for some time, also sees progress.
“I will certainly credit (Bridgeport school officials). We’ve brought concerns to the district and they have been willing to work with us, ” Smith said.

Smith said at Harding’s Twilight program, some really creative things are being done to engage students.
“There is a creative lead teacher doing things like bringing in speakers to talk about careers, ” Smith said.
“Things to re-engage students. I think what we need to start seeing is some uniformity amongst each site.”
Boucher said Briggs High School in Norwalk also falls into the category of a well-run program that helps students succeed. There need to be more like it, she said.

In Bridgeport, in addition to Twilight, the district started a new alternative school called PRIDE Academy this year. The school is located in the former St. Ambrose School on Mill Hill Avenue. PRIDE Academy has an enrollment of 96 students in grades 7 through 12, split between a morning and afternoon session. Most students are there because of truancy or behavioral issues. Others have been expelled.

The student who sparked a series of bomb scares at Bassick last year attends PRIDE. So is the student who hit a Central High School teacher with a snowball this winter. In most cases, the idea is to get students to the point where they can return to their home schools. Jim Denton, the current administrator at PRIDE, said a protocol is used to place students in the academy. One of the steps requires parental approval.

The school includes small class sizes grouped by ability, not age. Some electives, including art and physical education, have been added to the schedule. In one class recently, Hershey’s Kisses were passed out in a math class where the volume of cones was being determined. In another, music played in the background as students worked on computers. When the bell rings, students are escorted to their next class. “I’m just trying to get back for my junior year, ” said one 16-year-old student at PRIDE, who described the school as quieter than his home school. “There is no big fuss. You just do the work.”

“It’s still a pilot year, per se, ” added Fabrizi. “In the beginning, some things needed tweaking.”

Smith said the jury is still out on PRIDE: “It is fair to say it has had some growing pains.” Although things are moving forward, Smith questions the wisdom of having troubled youth from three different parts of town in the same school. If students at the school are worried about things related to gangs, it takes away from learning, he said. At the same time, the staff at PRIDE seems to be managing it well.

Fabrizi said there is constant collaboration with the Center for Children’s Advocacy. “If they raise a concern, we look into it immediately, ” he said.

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