

Coming soon for expelled students: a full-time education

By: JACQUELINE RABE THOMAS | September 8, 2017

What kind of education should the hundreds of students who are expelled each year from Connecticut's public schools receive?

That's long been up to local educators to determine.

That's about to change soon – courtesy of a new state law mandating that the State Board of Education set standards by Aug. 15. A lawsuit against the state that documented what expelled students were getting – or not getting – also helped.

According to state records for the 2013-14 school year, the most recent year available, most of the roughly 900 students expelled were provided with either a tutor for a few hours a week or enrollment in an alternative program — but the state has not yet set standards for those programs. In addition, dozens of those expelled are sent home with no alternative learning opportunity.



Harding High School in Bridgeport.

This week members of the state Board of Education's Legislation and Policy Development Committee got a preview of proposed new requirements that will soon come before the full board for approval.

They require that the alternative programs be “a full time, comprehensive experience, where the time devoted to instruction and learning is comparable to what the student would experience in a regular environment.” The department will expect most students to be in these programs, but acknowledged there “may be rare cases in which placement in such a setting would not be suitable.”

When requiring the department to set standards for expelled students, state lawmakers left it up to the education department to determine whether to require full-time alternative educational options.

Charlene Russell Tucker, the chief operating officer at the department, said all school districts will be expected to offer full-time programs for expelled students if the state board approves the recommendation. “It will be a requirement,” she said.

Several local school superintendents and school boards have opposed the requirement for a full-time program, saying it could be costly to implement.

The recommendations also will require districts to:

- Have clear written policies on the availability of alternative education for expelled students.
- Consider a checklist of alternatives to expulsion.
- Inform a child's parents or guardians at the beginning of an expulsion of their right to apply for a return to school before its scheduled conclusion and the criteria for early readmission.
- Develop an individualized learning plan for each student they expel.
- Review the students' plan at least once each grading period to review progress and consider opportunities for early readmission.
- Adopt clear and explicit criteria and procedures to address a student's transition back to school.

"They are going to develop a customized plan for the student," said Tucker. "Not just, 'Here's the kid, I'm going to put him there.'"

"The policy goal is to avoid having these students falling through the cracks, which anecdotal evidence says is happening," said Peter Haberlandt, director of legal and governmental affairs for the department. State board members 'outraged' by number of young students suspended

Erin D. Benham, a former Meriden teacher and a member of the state board, praised the education department for hopefully making it easier for students to return to school.

"Someone needs to address (the issue)," she said. "We can't just think it was addressed because they were out 180 days."

Marisa Halm, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy, one of three groups representing the students in the lawsuit, said during an interview Wednesday that she was pleased by the new standards.

"This is really good news for students... It means a few hours of tutoring a week is no longer acceptable," she said. "The state really should be playing more of a role... This has just been a population of students that for whatever reason hasn't been a focus of the state Department of Education."

The full state board could vote on the changes during a special meeting in the next couple of weeks or at its regular meeting next month.

The lawsuit against the state is in settlement talks now. On Wednesday the state board held a private meeting to discuss that case.