

# THE HOUR

## **New standards for expelled students could cost Norwalk \$225K**

State Board of Education approves new standards for expelled students

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NORWALK — A new state mandate could cost Norwalk Public Schools an additional \$225,000 next year.

New standards approved Wednesday by the state Board of Education will require districts to give expelled students access to programming comparable to what they would get in the regular classroom setting, and to address the issues that led to expulsion in the first place.

“Once again another unfunded mandate from Hartford,” said Mike Barbis, chairman of the Norwalk Board of Education. “This is going to cost us. We’re putting the \$225,000 cost in the budget we’re recommending for the 2018-2019 school year.”

In December, the state education board was presented with a report that showed 46 percent of expelled students get homework assignments and nothing else while they are excluded from school. Another 14 percent get tutoring and 23 percent are put into an alternative education setting. Nearly one in 10 gets nothing.

“Districts previously may have thought (homework) was in alignment with the law,” Commissioner of Education Dianna Wentzell said after the unanimous approval. “With the new standards clearly it is not, except in extreme cases.”

In keeping with a relatively new state law, however, the state Department of Education developed step-by-step guidelines with the help of stakeholders to make sure districts know what alternative education is considered appropriate, who should be involved in the process and how to monitor the plan developed for each expelled student.

Charlene Russell Tucker, chief operating officer for the department, said the goal is to make sure students have access to high quality programming even as the number of students expelled, on a statewide-basis, continues to decline.

A student is expelled when he or she is excluded from school for more than 10 consecutive days in a school year. In Connecticut public schools last year, the average expulsion lasted 115 days.

In 2016-17, there were 750 expulsions in the state compared, with 954 in 2012-13. Norwalk had 23 expulsions in the 2016-17 year, but the district has been on a steady decline since 2012-13 when more than 50 students were expelled.

“We’ve introduced a lot of things in the high schools which is where that tends to happen to reduce the number of students who are expelled,” Barbis said. “We’ve done a lot to make less of that occur.”

Students who are expelled run a greater risk of academic failure, dropping out and ending up in the juvenile justice system. Tucker acknowledged the new standards may require a change in mind set.

The group that developed the guidelines continues to work on formulating a list of best practices and establishing timelines for implementation. The department intends to send districts notices immediately. Wentzell said there is still some flexibility, given that each student expelled may have unique needs.

There are 80 alternative education providers in the state districts can look to, she added.

It is unclear what will happen if districts don't comply. Wentzell said it depends on the situation and how it is reported to the department.

Fran Rabinowitz, executive director of the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents, said it really comes down to what is best for the child.

"They should not just be out on the streets," Rabinowitz said. "A couple of hours of homebound (instruction) is not enough. Kids need to be brought to a place where there is tutoring and counseling. It's not just about missing algebra one."

**Marisa Masolo Halm, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy, who works primarily to defend the educational rights of children, agreed.**

**"The traditional expulsion experience of part-time tutoring is not acceptable," Halm said.**

Rabinowitz acknowledged that cost is a factor. The Bridgeport district lost its alternative education program this year — one of many programs eliminated due to chronic budget cuts.

Still, she said, the new standards are "not overbearing" and focus on the need to address social and emotional issues of students. If more of that were done earlier, Rabinowitz said, expulsions would be less likely.