

Executive Summary: Alternative Education in WCSD

DEVELOPMENT OF A TWO TIERED ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM

As the principals and special education supervisors met and discussed alternative education and how the WCSD addresses problems with our disruptive students, we came to several conclusions. These are summarized below.

Consistency

One of the issues that we addressed was consistency between buildings, grade levels and even individual administrators. We agreed that we would add up to 30 minutes to our monthly Administrative Team Meeting to bring forward and discuss discipline cases. Principals will have the opportunity to bring cases forward with letters or numbers used to preserve the anonymity of the student. Behaviors will be enumerated for the panel and interventions used to date will be presented in a summary fashion. This process will enable administrators to offer suggestions to one another regarding the preparation of behavior plans, planning for parent meetings and making recommendations for hearings and alternative education placements.

Expulsions

Many times principals work with students for an extended period of time prior to moving toward an expulsion hearing. There are several reasons for this. In some cases, student behavior is erratic with periods of disruptive behavior and then long periods of appropriate behavior. Other students display behavior patterns that may require testing for special education and so principals are hesitant to move forward too quickly in case the behaviors are the result of the student's disability. They prefer to refer the student for testing prior to considering a change in placement.

Principals are also concerned about the effect of an expulsion from school appearing on a student's record. Some colleges and universities ask if a student has been expelled and the principals are hesitant to allow inappropriate behavior, especially from a 14 or 15 year old student to follow them to college. An expulsion may also affect the options for students interested in certain types of military careers.

While alternative education may be a good placement for a student, expulsion may not always be the best way for a student to be placed there, particularly for the short term.

Purposes of Alternative Education and Reasons for Placement

The principals considered the purposes of alternative education programs and the reasons that students may be placed there. Alternative Education programs are designed to provide for temporarily removing persistently disruptive students in grades 6-12 from regular school programs. Programs must provide these students with a sound educational course of study that meets or exceeds state standards mandated by Chapter 4 and allows students to make normal academic progress toward graduation in their home district. AEDY programs must also provide behavioral supports and counseling aimed at modifying the disruptive behavior that led to the transfer.

A disruptive student is defined by the state regulations as one who poses a clear threat to the safety and welfare of other students or the school staff, who creates an unsafe school environment or whose behavior materially interferes with the learning of other students or disrupts the overall educational process. The disruptive student exhibits to a marked degree any or all of the following conditions:

- (1) disregard for school authority, including *persistent* violation of school policy and rules;
- (2) display of or use of controlled substances on school property or during school-affiliated activities;
- (3) violent or threatening behavior on school property or during school-related activities;
- (4) possession of a weapon on school property, as defined under 18 Pa. C.S. Section 912 (relating to possession of weapon on school property);
- (5) commission of a criminal act on school property;
- (6) misconduct that would merit suspension or expulsion under school policy; and
- (7) *habitual* truancy -- All procedures including the implementation of a Truancy Elimination Plan must have been implemented and followed PRIOR to placing habitually truant students in AEDY programs

This information will be further discussed in the next several sections.

Program Proposal

The administrators worked on designing a two-tiered program to better meet the needs of our students. The first tier would be housed at Warren Area High School and operated by district staff, just as our current program is, while the second tier would be housed at Beacon Light's Central Avenue facility and operated by their staff.

Tier One Placements

Students placed in this program would typically expect a 30 – 90 day stay. The time is fluid because upon entry into the program the team, consisting of the alternative education principal, the home school principal, the parents and the student, would agree

upon goals for behavior, academics and attendance. Students would earn their way out of the program by meeting and maintaining the established goals.

Students would be placed into this program for persistent violations of the rules, truancy and instances of misconduct that do not rise to the level of drugs, weapons, violent behaviors or criminal acts. The recommendation of the principals is that these placements should not require an expulsion by the Board. The process for a placement would require a peer review of the case by the monthly panel of principals meeting for disciplinary reviews, an informal hearing conducted by the building principal, the agreement of the parent as indicated by a letter of request for an alternative education placement and approvals from the Director of Special Education, the Director of Secondary Education and the Superintendent.

Students might also be placed into this program as a “step-down” placement when appropriate. According to the Purdon’s Statutes,

[alternative education] programs may include services for students returning from placements or who are on probation resulting from being adjudicated delinquent or who have been convicted of committing a crime in an adult criminal proceeding. When a student returns to a school district from a delinquency placement, the school district cannot automatically place a child in an alternative education program for disruptive youth merely because the child had been adjudicated delinquent. Each specific case must be examined on an individual basis. As with any other student being transferred to an AEDY program, students returning from delinquency placement are entitled to an informal hearing prior to being placed in an alternative education program. The purpose of the hearing is to determine whether the student is currently fit to return to the regular classroom or meets the definition of a disruptive student. Factors a school should consider include: whether the incident causing the adjudication occurred at school or at a school-sponsored event, the child’s behavior in placement, and the recommendations of teachers and other adults (such as juvenile probation officers) who have worked with the youth.

Experience has demonstrated to the administrators in this district that many times as students return from these highly structured environments, they may need the additional structure provided by an alternative education program prior to being re-introduced into the regular school environment.

There are also times that the Hearing Officer or the Board of Directors may choose to expel a student to the Tier One program. This might be appropriate because of the age of the student or the nature of the situation for which the student is being expelled. These expulsions could be for a period of time or they could be written so that students could earn their way out of the program.

Tier Two Placements

Students placed into the second tier of alternative education would be expelled by the Board of Directors. Students would typically be placed into this program for violations involving drugs, weapons, violence and criminal acts. Students who have had the opportunity to complete the Tier One program and have been unsuccessful either within that program or after returning to their home school will also be brought to the Board for expulsion.

The length of stay would be suggested by the Hearing Officer and determined by the Board at the time of the expulsion, but is typically expected to range from a semester to a year. Further information about this program is included in the separate document entitled service description that is also posted with this item.

Other Students Enrolled at Tier Two

Students from the Residential Treatment Facility in Youngsville who live outside Warren County will typically fill ten seats in the program. These are students that we are responsible for educating who are currently receiving services at the Youngsville schools, via cyber school or Nova Net or outside the district if the other options are not appropriate for them. Some of the Residential Treatment Facility students will still attend Youngsville, but some of them would benefit from the increased structure and the therapeutic component provided by the Tier Two Alternative Education program. Placements will be determined on a case by case basis, but an analysis of the students living at the Residential Treatment Facility over the past year indicates that 8-10 seats will be filled.

Originally, we had proposed 20 seats for the Tier Two Alternative Education Program. In continued discussions with Beacon Light, we realized that the space and the staff could accommodate 30 students at no additional cost to us. With the agreement of the District, the administration proposes that we sell 5 of those additional seats to Forest County which would help us in financing the program and actually help them to reduce their costs for alternative education.

Financial Considerations

Tier One – There would be no additional costs for this program. It is already in the budget and can be operated by using Warren High facilities and staff.

Tier Two – The complete budget proposed by Beacon Light is attached for your review.
The cost of the program amounts to about \$300,000 per year. It would be funded as follows:

Year One –	
Billing Back to Home Districts	\$140,000
Special Education Stimulus Funds	\$ 90,000
Special Education Funds	\$ 10,000
Forest Area Tuition	<u>\$ 60,000</u>
Total	\$300,000

Year Two –

Billing Back to Home Districts	\$150,000
Special Education	\$ 10,000
Forest Area	\$ 60,000
Beacon Light (Title I Education Funding)	\$ 20,000
Grant Funding (To be identified)	<u>\$ 60,000</u>
Total	\$300,000

Potential Savings to the District:

- 1) The Department of Health and Human Services has agreed that if this program is in place and we have a student who is eligible for the program who is facing placement that in all possible circumstances they will consider a foster family placement in Warren County which would allow us to avoid paying for out of district education.
- 2) Students from the Residential Treatment Facility that have had to be placed at schools outside of the district, such as Beacon Light Bradford, because of behavioral needs can now be served in Warren County saving transportation and tuition costs for the district.
- 3) Several of the students at the Residential Treatment Facility have had to be enrolled in cyber school programming. This would cease with the implementation of this program.
- 4) The program may reduce some of the special education costs in the Youngsville Area.

Recommendation:

That the Board of Directors approves the establishment of a two-tiered alternative education program and directs the administration to develop the appropriate contracts for this program with contracts to be returned at the next committee meeting.