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Delaware schools: Looking for early signs of dropout risk

Educators hope to be able to intervene early

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In January, Delaware schools will begin targeting students at risk for dropping out by analyzing attendance and math and reading scores.

State officials are hoping that by studying student data and looking for early warning signs, educators will be able to intervene before a student leaves school.

The initiative was discussed Wednesday at the state Board of Education monthly meeting, where board members heard information about dropout rates in Delaware.

The number of high school dropouts actually fell last year, with 1,998 Delaware students leaving school -- about 5.1 percent of the 38,610 students enrolled in grades nine through 12. In 2007, 5.8 percent of students dropped out.

Judi Coffield, state board policy analyst, said dropouts create long-term consequences for the state's economy.

For every student that dropped out last year, the state will lose about \$209,000 over the course of his or her lifetime, Coffield said.

More than half of last year's dropouts were male, while an equal number of white and black students -- about 44 percent each -- dropped out.

More students dropped out in ninth grade -- 36 percent -- than in any other grade. Eighteen percent dropped out in 12th grade, while 19 percent left in 11th grade and 27 percent in 10th grade.

Fifteen percent of the students who dropped out last year cited academic trouble, behavior issues, substance abuse or disliking school as their reason for leaving. Two percent left for personal reasons such as pregnancy, marriage or joining the military. The Department of Education did not have data on why about 82 percent of the students dropped out because their schools or districts did not report it.

Coffield said the department plans to require schools to keep better data on their dropouts.

Christina School District had the highest dropout rate in the state with 10.3 percent or 441 of its 4,287 high school students leaving. Capital and Seaford school districts both had dropout rates of 8 percent.

Some districts, such as Woodbridge, are making progress. There, school leaders saw more than a 50 percent decline in the dropout rate over the past three years, going from 12.4 percent to 5.8 percent.

"You always wonder if something is a blip. But with a steady decline over three years, we know the work is paying off," Woodbridge Superintendent Kevin Carson said.

He credits Woodbridge High School's adviser program, in which every student is assigned to a faculty or staff member.

"We take it personally if a student drops out of school," he said.

Colonial School District also saw its dropout rate decrease -- from 8.5 percent to 6.3 percent. Colonial Superintendent George Meney said William Penn High's "Twilight Program" has made a big difference for students who need to retake classes in order to graduate. He also credits the school's "Ninth Grade Academy," which gives freshmen extra support during their transition into high school.

"It helps these kids be more successful right in the beginning of high school," Meney said.

In other state board business, members discussed proposed regulations for the state's teacher and principal evaluation system and the accountability system for the lowest-performing schools.

Last week, the Markell administration announced its education reform plan, which aims to help the state compete for a portion of the \$4 billion federal Race to the Top Fund.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan plans to award portions of the competitive grant early next year -- and again in 2011-- to states willing to undertake changes in the way schools are run.

Several members of the public addressed the board, giving their opinion on the proposed policy changes.

"We cannot continue doing the same thing and expect different results," said Maria Matos, executive director of the Latin American Community Center. "These regulations will put us in a very competitive position for the Race to the Top grant, and you and I both know we need the money."

The changes include requiring teachers to show student growth to be rated effective and providing more support to failing schools.

The board will vote on the proposed regulations Jan. 14 -- just a few days before Delaware's Race to the Top application is due.

"Leave a legacy," Matos told the board. "Be remembered as the state board of education that made the bold move to move our state to true education reform."
