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Sun Follow-Up

Alternative education to get boost

Schools' plan is seen as key to reducing violence, dropout rate

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Baltimore school administrators unveiled a plan yesterday to reduce violence and the dropout rate by overhauling alternative education, nearly doubling the number of alternative school slots by August and creating morning and evening programs for working students.

The plan calls for the creation of two new alternative schools and the redesign of existing alternative schools, where most staff members will reapply for their jobs. The school system has already set aside \$15 million in its budget to fund the plan for the first year.

Alternative schools serve students with behavioral and academic problems. City schools chief Andres Alonso, who is completing his first year on the job, has said for months that reforming these schools is among his top priorities and a key component in stemming school violence. In recent weeks, a 13-year-old boy was charged with trying to rape a staff member at his middle school, and a video of a high school teacher being beaten during class was widely publicized on television and the Internet.

The city has room in its alternative schools for 1,450 students, not nearly enough to meet the demand. Alonso is planning the immediate creation of an additional 1,200 slots, for a total of 2,650.

Administrators presented the plan last night to get feedback from the school board and the public. They are striving to relieve a burden on teachers and administrators by removing - at least temporarily - some of the most disruptive students from regular schools. The goal is to eventually send many of those students back to their schools with improved social and academic skills.

Currently, students who are suspended are sent home with homework packets, a punishment that Alonso says is meaningless. Routinely, they are sent back to their home schools because the system does not have enough space in its alternative schools to serve them. Teachers complain that the system is sending the message that students can behave badly without consequences.



On any given day, about 270 students in Baltimore are on long-term suspension or expulsion, many at home.

"We want them back, and we want them supervised," said Jonathan Brice, the system's executive director of student support services, who presented the plan last night.

Overage students

The plan will heavily target the thousands of city students who have had to repeat one or more grades and are older than their classmates. Overage students are far more likely than their peers to be suspended and to drop out, and Alonso says it is critical to have quality alternative schools to meet their needs.

In the 2006-2007 academic year, more than 21,000 city students - 27 percent of the system's total enrollment - were at least a year older than their peers, according to data that Alonso presented last month at a forum for teachers. The proportion of overage students per grade increases every year, peaking in ninth grade, where 49 percent of students have been held back at least once. After ninth grade, the proportion declines as students begin to drop out.

The city's middle schools have 1,444 students who are at least two years overage, according to data presented last night. In high schools, the number who are two years behind or more is 3,975.

The system has found that being overage is the most powerful predictor of whether a student will drop out of high school, and students two or more years overage are the most likely to drop out: A quarter of them leave in ninth and 10th grades. Almost half leave in 11th grade.

Alonso's administration is calling for a comprehensive approach to serve students in alternative schools. The system will work with outside agencies to link students and their families with services such as counseling and provide the students with mentoring and other continuing support. It will also increase opportunities for internships and apprenticeships, and create a structure to support students who are making the transition from an alternative school back to a regular school.

Brice said the involvement of community organizations and other governmental agencies will be critical for the plan to succeed.

Modified schedules

Recognizing that many students drop out of school to help their families earn a living, some of the new programs will operate on modified schedules. By offering morning and evening classes, the programs double the number of students they are able to serve. They also give students time for internships and apprenticeships.

The two new schools to open this summer will be called the Baltimore Rising Star Academy and the Success Academy.

Rising Star Academy will serve overage middle school students, enrolling 200 students in the morning and 200 in the evening.

The Success Academy will work with students on long-term suspension and expulsion, serving 50 students each at three sites. Students will stay at the school for anywhere from a few weeks to a full school year.

Two existing alternative schools, Harbor City and Francis M. Wood, are required under the federal No Child Left Behind Act to restructure this year because of consistently low test scores. Last night, the

school board approved plans to require all or most of the staff to reapply for their jobs. The state school board must also sign off on the plans.

In addition, the schools will be redesigned and reopen as the Achievement Academy at Harbor City High School and the Excel Academy at Francis M. Wood High School. Both schools will target overage high school students, preparing them to go into the work force. Together, they will serve 1,200 students: 300 each in morning shifts and 300 each in evening shifts.

Other programs where staff will reapply for their jobs are Alternative Learning Center School 288, serving elementary school students in the Hilton Elementary building; Alternative Learning Center School 488, which serves students in the Lemmel and Lombard middle school buildings; and Laurence G. Paquin School, which serves pregnant girls and teen mothers.

Staff working for the several community programs operating within Harbor City's multiple sites will not need to reapply for their jobs. At all schools, those who are reapplying will be given jobs elsewhere in the system if not hired back for their existing positions.

In the coming years, Alonso plans to open 24 new combined middle/high schools, which he believes will better serve students who have been held back because they will be in a building with peers their own age. A third of the schools will be college-prep, a third will be vocational, and a third will be alternative schools serving students who are significantly behind academically.

The first six schools are scheduled to open in August, all with college-prep and vocational themes. Alternative schools were the missing piece of the equation when the six schools were approved in March. Alonso said at the time he was holding off because he said he needed to rethink the system's entire approach to alternative education. Now, he is soliciting applications for alternative middle/high schools to open in 2009.

Moving forward, Alonso also wants regular high schools to develop evening programs for students working during the day.

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