

OFFICE OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT, OVERSIGHT AND RECOVERY
Summary of State Board of Education Agenda Items
June 16-17, 2011

OFFICE OF DROPOUT PREVENTION

Office of Dropout Prevention and Compulsory School Attendance Enforcement

08. Approval to pilot the Alternative Education Guidebook for one year statewide

Alternative education programs in Mississippi target disruptive students in the traditional educational environment. The purpose of alternative education programs is to provide students with a combination of intense, individualized academic instruction and behavior analysis. Its impetus came from an honest effort to remove students from the traditional educational setting for disciplinary reasons.

The “zero tolerance” policy adopted by a large number of school boards has overwhelmingly increased the number of students placed in alternative settings. A 1996 Attorney General Opinion, #96-0346, stated that local school boards and school officials had broad authority to suspend or expel students for misconduct which increased the number of suspensions from 75,746 in 1998-1999 to 102,677 in 2008-2009. The most recent report for 2009-2010 revealed that the number of suspensions has since declined to 97,016. Previously during the 1998-1999 school years, the number of expulsions decreased from 1,655 to 1,015 in 2008-2009. However, the current number of expulsions for 2009-2010 revealed a slight increase of 1,174.

During the 2007 legislative session, Senate Bill 2338 amended MS Code §37-13-92 to give broad authority to school boards of local school districts to establish alternative education programs to meet the specific needs of the school district. During the 2009 legislative session, Senate Bill 2575 made two additional amendments to the legislation: 1) to provide for attendance requirements that allow for educational and workforce development opportunities, and 2) the provision that each school district having an alternative school program shall submit an annual report to the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) describing the results of its annual alternative school program review and evaluation. This report shall include a detailed account of any actions taken by the school district during the previous year to comply with substantive guidelines promulgated by the State Board of Education.

On February 24, 2009, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) released: “*Missing the Mark: Alternative Schools in the State of Mississippi*”, a report that chronicled a year long study on the effectiveness of alternative programs in Mississippi. The report stated that “the system of alternative schools in Mississippi has largely failed to provide a high-quality education to its students, and its poor design leaves many children drifting toward dropping out or failing”.

While the MDE acknowledges that, due to funding and staff restrictions, monitoring and technical assistance to statewide alternative education programs has been limited, the study forced the MDE to take a different look at the Alternative Education programs statewide. The department found:

- Programs of low quality.
- Programs not providing the educational or support services that are afforded to every child.
- Staff not properly trained to deal with students exhibiting disciplinary problems.
- Programs that do not have the needed personnel for appropriate operation.
- Programs without plans for intervention or on-going counseling for students derived from a behavior analysis.

The MDE, in its effort to ensure that all students receive not only a free appropriate public education but, an equitable and just learning experience has assessed concerns regarding alternative education programs.

- A task force was created to develop clear and concise procedures for alternative education.
- A self assessment tool has been developed.
- An Individualized Instruction Plan (IIP) has been developed for districts to use in the delivery of interventions for students placed in alternative programs. The IIP will consist of the student's level of performance in all areas, including academic and social.
- Trainings that focus on behavior analysis and student intervention for disruptive students have occurred and will continue annually.
- Annual reports must be submitted to MDE by all school districts.

The area of Alternative Education has been overlooked for years. Students placed in alternative education programs have the fundamental right to an education equivalent to the services provided in traditional school settings. However, some alternative programs are not providing any services or the services rendered are of low substance. The MDE will ultimately be held accountable for the lack of educational equality in these programs. The development of the guidebook outlines the procedures and responsibilities for those providing educational services in Mississippi schools. The evaluation tool is part of the guidebook. In order to ensure proper guidance for all school districts, piloting the document would enable districts the opportunity to provide valuable review and feedback.

The Alternative Education Guidebook will be piloted for one additional year (2011-2012) statewide.

Recommendation: Approval

Back-up material attached