

Agencies required to plan for offenders' school re-enrollment

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RICHMOND, Va. -- The state Board of Education on Wednesday adopted regulations that will require state agencies to work together to establish detailed plans for school-age offenders to return to class after serving time.

The regulations will guide school divisions, juvenile justice and correctional education officials to share educational records and coordinate planning for the students' transition back to public schools from juvenile prisons and detention centers. Students and their parents or guardians would also be involved in the process.

They also will require that each final re-enrollment plan make it possible for a student to start classes in a school division within two days of release from detention, and get weekly counseling over a designated time period.

The process is aimed at giving students re-entering public schools a "seamless process that's going to support them, help them know what their program is going to be academically, give them the support that they need to be successful in school and help them to sustain the progress that they've made," said Cindy Cave, director of the Department of Education's office of student services.

Wednesday's decision comes more than nine years after the General Assembly passed a law requiring the board to officially spell out details of what schools and juvenile corrections officials must do to prepare incarcerated students returning to public schools.

The Department of Criminal Justice Services directed researchers at the College of William and Mary to study the re-enrollment process and make recommendations to a committee that drafted regulations, which were brought before the Board of Education in 2002.

The study recommended establishing a re-enrollment plan for each offender to share information about the student's education while incarcerated and to ease the transition back into the schools. But a required review of the proposed regulations wasn't completed within the necessary time period, and the measure expired.

The issue was put back on the table in September 2004, when the Board of Education voted to proceed with efforts to place more oversight on re-enrollment and formed a task force to come up with new regulations, which would cover all school-age students, plus students up to 21 years old who have special-education needs or are English learners.

Board of Education member Gary Jones thanked those who pushed for the regulations, including Charlottesville youth-advocacy group JustChildren, saying "the children that are addressed by these regulations have been overlooked for years.

"I think that their needs have not been well addressed for years, at least in a timely manner," Jones said.

There are about 1,000 offenders in Virginia's juvenile prisons or detention homes, and a large majority of them will return to public schools when released, according to the Department of Juvenile Justice.

Often, many youths make good educational progress while incarcerated because of the structured atmosphere and attempts by the Department of Correctional Education to catch them up to the appropriate grade-level learning, said Deron M. Phipps, a legislative liaison with the Department of Juvenile Justice.

"It's important to get the kids in school as quickly as possible so they have structure and have a chance to become successful, and lower the potential for recidivism," Phipps said.

There are also financial reasons to make sure juvenile offenders stay in school. It costs Virginia nearly \$78,000 annually for each youth housed in a state juvenile prison, according to the Department of Juvenile Justice.

But some students who have been released have returned to schools with no notice, no records and no re-enrollment plan, according to JustChildren. State education officials have acknowledged that some school divisions do a better job than others in helping students with the transition.

"There's a tremendous amount of work keeping up with movement and placement, and a lot of these kids come in and they've bounced around a lot," said George Drewry, principal of John H. Smyth High School at the Hanover Juvenile Correctional Center. "Trying to find the pieces of the puzzle and fitting them together is a major undertaking."

Also, some schools have been leery of enrolling students convicted of crimes.

"A lot of times, public schools only see the bad part and remember the bad part; they don't get a chance to be part of the turnaround," Drewry said.

But he said a big responsibility also falls on the former offender, who often is returning to the same environment that fostered the bad behavior.

"A student must understand that they cannot go back to the same friends and habits," Drewry said. "You have to change your life; it's a total lifestyle change."

Department of Education: <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/>

Department of Juvenile Justice: <http://www.djj.virginia.gov/>

Department of Correctional Education: <http://www.dce.state.va.us/>

JustChildren: <http://www.justice4all.org/programs/justchildren/>