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Title: A better way to track students who leave school

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A better way to track students who leave school

High school students over age 16, who want to leave school now, need only tell school officials they are enrolling in an adult education credit diploma or GED program to stay off the drop out roster.

Should the student try the program for two days and then quit, he or she is essentially forgotten, and the school district doesn't have to report it.

But starting July 1, students who leave public high school for an adult education or GED program will be tracked by their student identification number.

"If they leave the system, you now have to call them a drop out," said Al Larson, research and evaluation specialist for Meriden Public Schools. "It's a real issue; the high schools don't want to have this."

Most Connecticut school districts have seen sharp decreases in the number of drop outs since 1998, due to a variety of reasons, but mainly changes in the way "drop out" or "transfer out" is defined, said Larson, who has pushed state education officials for more consistency and accuracy. Other sources such as the Workforce Alliance, and a report commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, also found exaggerated graduation rates.

Both reports instead found state and national drop-out rates reaching above 20 percent in many urban areas. Using U.S. Census data, the Workforce Alliance, which services the Middlesex and New Haven County labor markets, found 26 percent of people age 25 and older in the counties' urban centers classified as drop outs.

Under the new student tracking program, it will take several years to reach a more accurate number of high school dropouts, said William Villano, executive director of the Workforce Alliance.

But Villano and Meriden Adult Education and Continuing Education Director Donn Friedman are pushing to see that more students get diplomas. Villano wants to raise the age at which a student can drop out with parental consent from 16 to 18. Friedman wants to get more graduates ready for the workforce.

"My goal is to increase the number of people who achieve a high school diploma," Friedman said. "Without that paper, it becomes that much more difficult to get into the

workforce, which drains the community. I want to cut down the percentage of adults who don't graduate and create programs that make it easier for people."

In Meriden, this year's adult education enrollment number is higher than the 2006 graduating class of 80 students, Friedman said. In Meriden's adult education program, GED, basic skills, and English as a second language classes are held at the Women & Families Center, while the adult diploma classes are at Platt High School.

As the department's new director, Friedman follows his predecessor James Ieronimo's connection to local businesses. Ieronimo's links to the business community helped bridge school and work. Friedman is building on that effort with classes that also teach the life and work skills needed to make students successful wage earners. His staff recently drafted a life-skills curriculum to teach health, resume writing, personal banking and more.

"We're connected to the business community, so that students are not only ready for the community, but ready for the workplace," Friedman said. "We meet each other's needs and have created a two-way street between adult education and business."

Friedman is also aware that transportation and work challenges can prevent students from completing a diploma program. To reach those students who don't have steady transportation and help them hold down jobs, the department is creating an adult virtual high school this fall.

After a short orientation, the program would offer online lessons for students. It also opens up summer school for the first time, helping students get their diplomas faster.

"Our staff was really excited about that," Friedman said. "It gives people another option."

Friedman would also like to see a high school diploma program closer to the downtown area, near the Women & Families Center, the Greater Meriden Chamber of Commerce, the CT Works One Stop Center and Middlesex Community College- a lifelong learning and support campus. This would allow students to visit one location for job support, education and training programs.

But money is always a factor, and Platt High School is free, he said.

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