

School Department to Embark on Alternative High School Program

School officials wish to fill a void that currently exists in regards to in-district education programs for at-risk and educationally-challenged students.

By [Lauren Costa](#) | May 22, 2013



For several years, Coventry school officials have been brainstorming ways to better serve local students who are considered at-risk, educationally disadvantaged or who have a history of underachievement in traditional school settings. As it stands today, many of these students are enrolled at out-of-district institutions which offer alternative programs to address their individual needs. Although the practice is generally successful for students and their families, it comes at a high cost to the Coventry school district, which is required to pay the out-

of-district, or in some cases, out-of-state tuition, currently averaging about \$40,000 annually per student.

To address this concern, members of the school department have been actively seeking an opportunity to give [Coventry High School](#) students who have distinct educational or behavioral challenges, the chance to study in their own community while receiving the care and instruction needed to succeed.

Although plans remain in the preliminary stages, school officials are strongly considering leasing a unit at 1193 Tiogue Ave., formally the Sylvan Learning Center, to accommodate CARE, the Coventry Alternative Resource for Education. Leasing the location would cost the school district \$40,000 per year - roughly the cost of sending one student to an out-of-district school. According to Superintendent Michael Almeida, the plan would not require additional staffing, only the reallocation of existing faculty within the district including but not limited to two highly qualified teachers (at least one with special education certification), a school psychologist, social worker, director and guidance counselor. During the first few years, the school would serve approximately 20 CHS students, but may possibly expand in the future to include a number of middle school students, as well.

"This would be a tremendous cost savings for us," said Almeida. "Just keeping one student in district would cover the lease and over time, we may be in a position ourselves to accept students from other districts and charge tuition."

He also spoke of how the CARE program would decrease the potential drop-out rate of the students in question as well as the unnecessary and frequently ineffective resources currently being used on instruction and discipline. It would also address disruption to the entire school community that commonly occurs with at-risk students.

"These are still our students - they're not separate and distinct from the high school, this is a program within Coventry High School so they still have all the same requirements and graduation expectations, just in a separate building," explained CHS Principal Michael Hobin. "Some of the idea behind this is to take away the audience so that these students will have the opportunity to be in an environment where they don't have to act up to get the attention of everybody around them."

During the most recent Coventry School Committee meeting, Director of Special Services, Susan Lyons presented a working draft of the program, explaining its purpose and a general plan for admission and curriculum.

"CARE is proposed because we recognize that youth with emotional and behavioral challenges tend to have extremely poor outcomes," read the program description. "According to statistics, more than half of these students do not complete high school and once they are out of school, this group is typically unemployed or underemployed and poor. Many of our students turn 18 and are disengaged from their families and support systems. We even have some students as young as 14 who are "couch surfing" (technically homeless), because families have asked them to leave. Many of these students have behavioral health needs and substance abuse issues. They are in and out of the Juvenile Justice System."

The CARE plan would implement two distinct admission processes and curricula. One process would focus on students that do not generally have discipline problems, but suffer from significant emotional and behavioral issues commonly addressed by Individualized Education Program (IEP) placement. Although these students would be getting their education outside of the CHS campus, they would always have access to any extracurricular activities offered by the school. Students placed by IEP teams or non-disciplinary referrals would be offered specialized plans to address graduation requirements, daily living skills and coping strategies as well as access to individual and group counseling.

The second process would be directed at habitual school offenders or students who have a history of using drugs, weapons and extreme aggression, or causing bodily harm to others. School administrators would place these students on a case-by-case basis into an initial 45-day minimum placement that would include social suspension (prohibiting students from attending dances, sporting events and extracurricular activities). Students placed by administrative directive would be provided the opportunity to continue working towards their graduation requirements and receive support for substance abuse issues, as well as family support and clinical services.

Lyons explained that Kent County Mental Health would be available to provide no-cost wraparound services for students and their families. In addition, Coventry's Dept. of Human Services and Substance Abuse Prevention Taskforce would also be on hand to assist students with substance abuse issues.

"Although we don't only have substance abuse issues, they are a big part of this problem and I want to commend the Substance Abuse Taskforce and school department for acknowledging and going after it," said Hobin. "We don't have any more of a drug problem than any other school in America, we're just exposing it."



School Committee members unanimously expressed their support of pursuing the CARE program and its alternative school setting, and were agreeable to opening the leased location in August at the start of the 2013-2014 school year, if possible.

"I truly believe we can do as good a job or a better job than anywhere else," said School Committee Chair Kathy Patenaude. "Our kids will be happier here. I'm 100 percent behind this."