

Change likely to boost school dropout count

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By Allison Sherry
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Secondary school principals will have to start counting all students who do not show up for class as "dropouts" unless they have written proof from another school that the student has transferred, according to new rules adopted Thursday by the State Board of Education. The move is expected to greatly increase the number of counted dropouts.

Before Thursday's decision, principals often counted students as transfers even though they never confirmed those students enrolled in another school.

Nearly one in five seniors left their high schools in the state's 20 largest districts in 2003, according to state records reviewed by The Denver Post last year.

The findings also revealed a flawed and inconsistent student tracking system, with no checks or balances for accuracy.

As a result, experts say, many more students may be dropping out of Colorado's public high schools than the state reports.

Proponents pushed for Thursday's rule changes so that the state will one day have more-reliable graduation figures.

"I hope districts will be comfortable with these new rules. It's not about a 'we-gotcha,'" said Sen. Nancy Spence, R-Centennial, who sponsored a bill in the General Assembly last year that asked state board members to refine their definitions of "dropouts" and "transfers."

"I do think the state of Colorado deserves an accurate count of where all the students are," Spence said.

The decision, which will be enforced starting next year, requires districts to provide written proof that the student has transferred.

Without this, the state will count the student as a dropout.

Principals and school district officials decried the new rule as punitive, saying they don't have the resources to prove where students go when they stop coming to class - or when they don't show up to school in the first place.

Schools could be unfairly punished for students they lose, principals said.

"If the school board is intent on punishing and embarrassing schools, then they're doing a good job," said Phil Fox, deputy director of the Colorado Association of School Executives.

"It's going to force the dropout rate to go up, and it's not good. It will increase the criticism of us," he said.

Denver West High School principal Angie Bodenhamer said she worries that the state will count those incoming freshmen who never show up on the first day of school as dropouts, when they may have enrolled somewhere else.

"They (the students) could be in another state or another school district or another country," she said, noting that West High staffers already do home visits and phone calls to try to track students. "It's a major resource issue for us to find them."

The support to refine the way school districts count dropouts drew in an odd mix of political bedfellows.

New state board member Bob Schaffer, a former Republican congressman, voted with Democrat Jared Polis, vice chairman of the state board, in approving the measure.

"Regardless of where you are politically, there's enough interest in getting accurate information," said Van Schoales, executive vice president of the Colorado Children's Campaign, which helped write the new rules. "It will make everybody look accurate, and it will make the state look better than other states."

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