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## New strategies helpful to struggling Lansing students

### District revisits its alternative ed discussion today

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After months of reports, discussions and a deadlocked vote July 1, the Lansing school board meets again tonight to try to decide how the district will help students who don't succeed at Sexton, Everett or Eastern high schools.

The choice has not been so tough elsewhere.

Facing federal and state pressure to boost graduation rates, attendance and achievement, districts in mid-Michigan and beyond are abandoning alternative high schools for options such as:

- Teacher-monitored, self-paced online learning.
- Intervening from kindergarten on to help kids with social or learning difficulties.

"The accountability and the expectations for these students have significantly increased, so districts are exploring and trying to figure out how to best meet their needs," said Cindy Anderson, assistant superintendent for instruction for the Ingham Intermediate School District.

"We're going to look at the needs of students along a continuum and need to have a set of programs and services available to support that," Anderson said. "I don't know if it's going to be stand-alone alternative ed programs."

Grand Ledge closed its alternative program, Sawdon High School, at the end of the 2009-10 school year.

"It wasn't just a budget cut," said Kathy Peasley, assistant superintendent for academic services. "It was a budget cut precipitated by a need to serve the students in a different way."

The change returns most Sawdon students to Grand Ledge High School. Kids in seventh grade and up who are struggling will get extra help to keep them on track.

"We're trying to get them caught up before they ever come into high school," Peasley said.

## Issue unresolved

The Lansing school board passed its 2010-11 budget June 22 without resolving the issue of how it would provide alternative education. It meets at 5 p.m. today to consider the issue again.

Lansing's current alternative high school, based at the Hill Center, has undergone a number of revamps over the past few years, but is expected to fail to make adequate yearly progress under federal No Child Left Behind rules for the fourth time this year.

Administrators recommend contracting with Virginia-based Advance Path Academics to replace the program with online learning programs at each of the district's three high schools. Students would spend four hours a day at the computer, coached and assisted by Lansing teachers.

The program would cost \$2.7 million a year for the next five years.

## Many don't pass

Critics say that's expensive compared with the \$1.3 million budgeted for Education Options. The hope: It will bring back students who have dropped out, generating more state aid.

Julie Lemond, chief academic officer for the Lansing School District, said the district has spent two years researching a new alternative program.

A key issue that has come up repeatedly: whether online learning is the right approach for disadvantaged kids.

At Lansing Community College's math lab, for example, students work their way through math classes on their own schedules. Instructors are there to help, and students must be there at least four hours a week.

Last fall, barely half of the students who took remedial math classes in the math lab passed. Those who took those classes in a traditional setting passed at a rate of 73.3 percent. LCC will shut down the lab at the end of the summer.

"If someone is able to do well by sitting at a computer, that person already has strong motivation, has confidence in himself or herself and being able to learn," said Lois Bader, executive director of the Capital Area Literacy Coalition. "But human interaction is very, very, very important."

Bader's group often works with high school dropouts in their early 20s.

## Kids are 'engaged'

Lemond said the program has more to offer than an online interface: "We're not just putting kids in front of computers," she said. "We're offering the students who struggle the most with traditional high school experiences a different experience. ... They are going to receive support and nurturing from our own staff."

Anderson said the Ingham Intermediate School District sees promising signs for its Ombudsman program. It serves about 60 kids in the Waverly district with an online program similar to Advance Path. Students are at the computer in an away-from-school location for four hours a day, assisted by four teachers. They also can take electives at Waverly High.

"The data we have coming back is that we have about a 90 percent attendance rate," Anderson said. "The kids are very engaged."

The electronic system helps teachers quickly evaluate student performance and respond to their needs, Anderson said: "They can see within a few days whether a kid is on track or off track with their individual learning program."

Staff writer Matthew Miller contributed to this report.