

NEWS

Connecticut Department of Education

Dr. Mark K. McQuillan
Commissioner



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State Department of Education Suspends Operations at J.M. Wright Technical High School for Two Years in Order to Study Options for Restructuring

State Education Commissioner Mark K. McQuillan today announced that he has taken action to suspend operations at J.M. Wright Technical High School for two years.

His statement is as follows:

J.M. Wright Technical High School was originally scheduled to open its doors for instruction on August 27, 2009. Due to the retirement incentive program and voluntary transfers, the J.M. Wright professional staff has been reduced to twelve faculty. Student enrollment continues to decline, with a total projected enrollment for the upcoming school year of 167 students attending a school with a capacity of 700. Given the prohibitive costs of maintaining the school and the logistics of opening school on time, I cannot support the reopening of this facility until we are sure we have a program that resonates with and responds to the needs of students in lower Fairfield County.

The State Board of Education and the Technical High School Committee have worked tirelessly to find a resolution to this problem. Over the past year, we have explored a number of options to revitalize this school, including converting it to a school modeled on the Bristol Technical Education Center and creating a dual campus model with Norwalk Community Technical College. In addition, a proposal to create a Middle College model with Norwalk Community College was also explored. The State's economic downturn and the close proximity of opening day, make it next to impossible to proceed with any of these options. The projected per pupil expenditure for J.M. Wright for the 2009-2010 school year is \$27,000 – nearly double the average per pupil expenditure in the Connecticut Technical High School System and in the rest of Connecticut's public school districts. Were J.M. Wright to remain open and operate at last year's level, it would require, minimally, 68 full-time and part-time positions at a cost of nearly \$4 million (not including operating costs).

In December 2008, the State Board of Education recommended that if budgetary considerations required a significant cut to the budget of the Connecticut Technical High School System, the least harmful way of effecting those cuts would be to suspend operations at J.M. Wright. The facts set forth above and the continuing budget crisis emphasize that conclusion. For these reasons, the appropriate action is to suspend

operations for two years. During that time, options for revitalizing the school can continue to be studied. Given the State's obligation to provide timely notice to the students, parents, staff, and sending school districts, the Department is notifying all affected parties. The Department has sent letters to students and parents to explain the options they have to attend other technical high schools in the region or to return to their hometown high schools. At the same time, the Department is preparing to transfer the remaining teachers and support staff to other positions within the school system or State service. This also provides time for local school systems to prepare to enroll and counsel students should they decide to return to their hometown high schools.

This has been a difficult decision, but the reasons are clear and compelling. We know that this will meet with some controversy. However, it presents the best chance to preserve the strength of the Connecticut Technical High School System during this period of economic travail and to establish a viable, long-term plan that will enable the Connecticut Technical High School System to once again serve the needs of the greater Stamford region.

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