

# Fresno Unified talks plans to overhaul alternative programs

<http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/03/24/3841160/fresno-unified-talks-plans-to.html>

By Hannah Furfaro

The Fresno Bee

March 24, 2014

Education for the most at-risk students in Fresno Unified School District is set to change next year, as the district's community day school moves across town to southeast Fresno and DeWolf Continuation High switches to serve older students.

The plan unveiled at a special school board meeting Monday would shake up the district's approach to alternative education, which serves youngsters struggling to graduate on time or facing other challenges, like homelessness or drug addiction. The board took no action, but is expected to continue discussing the plan on Wednesday.

Current independent study programs would expand under the proposal, and comprehensive high schools would add more counseling, tutoring and independent options for students who are falling behind. It would also create an education resource hub that would assess at-risk kids and decide where to place them.

"This is very exciting," said Trustee Janet Ryan, who called it the "most exciting" effort the district has made related to alternative education since she's been a board member.

Trustee Christopher De La Cerda said he's glad students will have more alternative options at their neighborhood school.

The plan also would inject up to \$2 million into Phoenix Secondary community day school's budget to fund a move from its current campus on Dakota and North Pleasant avenues and expand to 180 students in grades seven to 12.

The school -- which currently serves about 60 students who have been suspended or expelled -- would be housed on the old Southeast Elementary site on Church and Peach avenues, which is currently used for staff and teacher training.

Also part of the proposal: Move teachers from DeWolf -- which is being demolished this year -- to Phoenix's current spot. Michael Neece, chief academic officer, said 100 to 150 fifth-year seniors would take classes there. About 130 students in grades 11 and 12 attend DeWolf.

In February, the school board voted to take down the existing DeWolf buildings. The \$12 million project includes raising a two-story, 15-classroom building and staff offices for Design Science High School, which shares the campus with DeWolf.

Not everyone is on board with the overhaul.

Trustee Carol Mills said she's worried the plan cuts back "severely" on alternatives for students. She asked what would happen to current students -- including 26 juniors who would no longer be eligible to attend DeWolf. Brian Wall, assistant superintendent for school support services, said it's likely those students will transfer to their neighborhood high schools.

"We can't expect one size is going to fit all, and in some ways, that's what we're trying to do here," Mills said.

In interviews, students and teachers from DeWolf say they were blind-sided by the plan to close the school as it currently operates.

Kevin Tarver, a 17-year-old who lives in foster care, said his friends and teachers at DeWolf helped keep him grounded after a turbulent childhood. The aspiring video-game designer lived in a group home after his mother, who was addicted to methamphetamine, could no longer care for him; by the time he was a teenager, he had his own addiction to marijuana.

DeWolf -- which serves far fewer students than a typical comprehensive school -- became his "escape from it all." It's where he got his first A, brought his grade point average up to a 3.0.

But Kevin, who is a junior, still has 100 credits left to complete before he can graduate. He's worried he'll be sent back to a big school, or be put in an independent study program.

"I ended up staying clean thanks to DeWolf, graduating from a drug program," he said. "A lot of us have just been down bad roads and now we're trying to make up (for it). We're not going to have the chance to anymore because they're taking it all away."

Teachers are worried too.

"(Kevin) has gathered computer skills, literacy skills we take for granted that all kids have. When you take away the stability, he's going to have to go back and start all over again," said John Hazelett, Kevin's teacher. "That's the fear."

Russ Allen, a DeWolf math teacher, said the school is being upended just as it's begun to improve graduation rates. California Department of Education data show 21 students graduated in 2008 -- in 2012, 74 students got their diplomas.

"It's just a night-and-day difference," he said.

The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6412, [hfurfaro@fresnobee.com](mailto:hfurfaro@fresnobee.com) or @hannahfurfaro on Twitter.