

Atlantic County Alternative High School may close

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MAYS LANDING — The Atlantic County Alternative High School may close at the end of the school year.

Faculty members were informed of the school's possible closing by Atlantic County Vocational School District Superintendent Philip Guenther during a staff meeting Thursday.

Guenther said the sending districts of Atlantic City, Pleasantville and Greater Egg Harbor Regional informed the vocational district's business administrator they would not be sending as many students to the Alternative High School next year. As a result, Guenther said, the district may be unable to put together a program for next year.

There were roughly 85 students enrolled in the Alternative High School during the 2019-20 school year. Atlantic City would be reducing the number of students sent to the alternative school by nearly 45, while the other two districts were reducing the number of students by about 15.

"We obviously cannot sustain a program with staffing and all the services that we provide for 25 students," Guenther said.

Efforts to reach Atlantic City Superintendent Barry Caldwell and Pleasantville Superintendent Dennis Anderson for comment were unsuccessful.

Atlantic City Board of Education President John Devlin said that while there have been prior discussions about relocating alternative students, no decision had been made and no action had been voted on.

Guenther said it was still possible circumstances could change before Tuesday, when the vocational district is required to submit its annual budget to the county.

"We would certainly continue (operating the Alternative High School) if (the sending districts) made a commitment to send students to us," Guenther said. "We would have to figure out what number makes it viable for us to do so. ... We certainly want to make sure that there is a program that they can go to next year to achieve success and to continue on with their goals for college and career as they transition from high school."

The Atlantic County Alternative High School is for students who have experienced attendance, behavior or achievement problems in traditional educational settings. To be considered for the Alternative High School, students must be referred by their sending district guidance counselors.

During its more than 30 years of operation, the Alternative High School has had as many as 110 students in a single year.

Sending districts pay tuition and transportation costs to the Alternative High School in advance for open spots, which are then filled throughout the school year on an as-needed basis. According to Guenther, the cost for a student is roughly \$15,000, while special education students cost about \$21,980. The sending district gets to keep the allotted state aid for those students.

The staff at the Alternative High School consists of academic and special education teachers, as well as a social worker and guidance counselor. Staff members with tenure have “bumping rights,” which will allow them to secure positions at Atlantic County Institute of Technology.