

# Blumenthal declares Wright Tech closure legal

By Brian Lockhart, Staff Writer

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HARTFORD -- Attorney General [Richard Blumenthal](#) has determined state education officials' procedures for closing [J.M. Wright Technical High School](#) in August were legal, but they could have been far more transparent, he said.

Blumenthal's opinion, issued over the weekend, also concluded that if Wright Tech does not reopen, the state cannot sell the facility for a profit because it was built on land donated by the city in 1956.

Education Commissioner [Mark McQuillan](#), with the support of Republican Gov. [M. Jodi Rell](#), announced one month before the Aug. 27 opening day that he was suspending operations at Wright Tech for at least two years because of the budget crisis.

Though education officials have since formed a committee whose goal is to plan for a reopening, there is so far no financial commitment to renovate, re-equip and re-staff the building.

Earlier this winter, Democratic legislative leaders, at the request of the Stamford delegation, asked Blumenthal to examine the legality of McQuillan's decision.

"It is our opinion that the state Board (of Education) and Commissioner followed the statutory procedure for suspending operations at J.M. Wright Technical High School," Blumenthal wrote. "But the existing procedural requirements are minimal and do not explicitly describe the opportunity for and weight to be afforded the views and opinions of the public on the potential suspension of operations or closing of any technical school."

Hearst Connecticut Newspapers reported last month that although the state school board in December 2008 reluctantly suggested McQuillan and Rell close Wright Tech as part of a budget resolution, the decision to shutter the building was made behind-the-scenes without a chance for the public to weigh in.

According to an internal July 2009 e-mail, Board Chairman [Allan Taylor](#) was reluctant to give Rell a joint statement from that body and McQuillan supporting Wright Tech's closure because that vote was never taken.

"I think any discussion of a conclusion to shut by the state board raises a significant Freedom of Information Act issue, since the board has not taken that public vote. I would certainly need to poll the board," Taylor wrote at the time.

In another e-mail, he stated: "We haven't decided to close the school. We just decided that if the budget required, the school should be closed. I didn't want to suggest that we had taken the next step (as) a board."

After Sen. [Andrew McDonald](#), D-Stamford, suggested in late summer the school closing might be illegal, School Board Chairman Allan Taylor added to the agenda of a regular Nov. 4 meeting a resolution supporting McQuillan's decision to close Wright Tech after the fact.

"No statute requires the state board or commissioner to specifically reach out to parents, students, employees and other stakeholders about the possible closing or suspension of operations of a technical school," Blumenthal wrote. "Clearly such actions would have been helpful here."

Blumenthal said the [General Assembly](#) should pass legislation amending the process to ensure such closings or suspension of operations are "open and transparent and afford all stakeholders a true opportunity -- with prior notice and public hearings -- to voice their concerns and opinions prior to a final decision."

A bill proposed by the Legislature's [Education Committee](#) requires the [state Board of Education](#) to hold a public vote for any closures or suspensions longer than six months.

The legislation would also specify that at least two of the 11 members of the state Board of Education "have industrial, trade or technical school experience."

Legislative leaders also asked Blumenthal to consider whether the state could sell Wright Tech.

A July 24 e-mail among staff in Rell's budget office states, "If Wright Tech is not truly closed, the state will lose a potentially lucrative opportunity to market the property to a private developer."

Blumenthal wrote in his opinion that "although the deed from the city to the state did not place any restrictions on the state's use of the property, we believe that it is likely a court would find that the property may only be used for educational or park purposes" because that was its original use.

Rell budget director [Robert Genuario](#) declined to comment on Blumenthal's opinion because he had not read it. But he said the sale of Wright Tech was not "an integral part" of the reasoning behind the school's closure.

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