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Capitol Hearing: State's Technical High Schools Poorly Funded

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HARTFORD —

The state's technical high schools are plagued by leaking roofs, serviced by broken-down buses and are so cash-strapped that some have run out of basic supplies such as wire in the electrical shop, legislators and education leaders said during a legislative hearing Monday.

Principals at times are pressed into service as building maintenance supervisors and funding requests to renovate the schools and replace buses have been ignored for years.

"Students' constitutional right to an equal educational opportunity is being violated by the way the state runs these schools," said state Sen. Tom Gaffey, co-chairman of the legislature's education committee.

Gaffey led the charge at the education committee's at-times contentious hearing Monday to get to the heart of the problems plaguing state-run technical schools.

Gaffey, a longtime champion of technical schools, called Monday's hearing after being flooded by calls and e-mails from parents. He said the final straw was hearing parents complain that their children could not get bus transportation to apprenticeship programs.

Legislators questioned Education Commissioner Mark McQuillan and technical school interim Superintendent Patricia A. Ciccone for about two hours, asking about the budget process, the decision to close J.M. Wright Tech for two years and how much time the state board of education actually devotes to technical schools.

The state's 16 technical schools, which serve 10,000 students, have been hard hit by round after round of budget cuts. The schools are still down 67 employees after a retirement incentive program last year and Wright Tech in Stamford was closed to further cut costs.



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"We are as distraught about our circumstances at the schools as you are," McQuillan said. "It is very plain to me that with the downturn of the economy, we have faced very difficult issues."

McQuillan said he considers the state's technical schools to be an "extraordinary treasure," but pointed out that the system has been hit with wave after wave of staff losses.

Cicccone, the acting superintendent, said that teachers and principals are working hard to fill in the gaps and provide quality education. She said that she has asked without luck for funding to replace aging buses, maintain buildings and renovate those in disrepair since 2007.

During the meeting, Beverly R. Bobroske, a state board of education member and chairwoman of the technical school committee, said that she was a passionate supporter but admitted that she was not aware of many of the problems at the technical schools.

"If you all aren't fighting for these kids, who is going to?" Gaffey responded.

Gaffey said he analyzed tapes of the state school board meetings and found that the board spent only two to 20 minutes a meeting discussing technical schools. Bobroske said the subcommittee spends more time on the technical schools and goes over programs and other issues.

Gaffey said he also requested information on the budgets for each of the technical schools before the meeting and was surprised to discover that they do not have their own budgets. Instead, they submit a funding request to the state Department of Education, which includes the request in its budget.

Gaffey said the committee intends to introduce legislation to address the system's shortcomings. For example, he said he plans to propose that each school adopt its own budget and submit it to a central office, which would then submit the full budget request to the state Office of Policy and Management, circumventing the state Department of Education altogether. He said he also plans to suggest that at least one member of the state board of education have a background in the trades.

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