

Mental hospitals may lose schools

BY LYNN BONNER, Staff writer

RALEIGH - Schools in the state's three psychiatric hospitals could be eliminated as officials consider making local school districts responsible for educating hospitalized children.

The change could have its biggest impact on children who are hospitalized for long stretches. Instead of taking classes at hospital schools that have their own teachers and schedules, students would rely more on their home districts to help them keep up with class work.

A patient advocacy group is questioning whether a drawback in school services would violate federal law or state code.

Children who are admitted to hospitals are expected to keep learning, if they can.

Some hospitals, particularly children's hospitals, set aside space for classrooms to help young patients maintain routines and stay on track with school work.

The change would reflect the realities of modern psychiatric treatment where fewer children spend months in the hospital, said Dwight Pearson, director of the state Department of Health and Human Services' office of education services. "Modern medicine has created some real miracles," he said.

Children admitted to psychiatric hospitals would remain enrolled in their local districts rather than enroll in hospital schools.

The local districts would continue to be responsible for the children's education while they are hospitalized.

"It ensures a continuity of service," said Pearson.

The new practice would be similar to the arrangements schools make for students whose injuries or illnesses force them to stay at home for extended periods.

DHHS has not discussed with local school districts that they may be asked to take on the responsibility for educating hospitalized children, Pearson said, because the plan is preliminary.

He envisions school districts that are miles from the psychiatric hospitals using the Internet to help reach students.

The trimmed education service was included in the suggestions for cuts the department gave legislators.

"It's part of an overall look at possibilities for the budget," said Renee McCoy, DHHS spokeswoman. "At this point, nothing is in stone."

But an e-mail sent this month from the DHHS administrator told hospital directors to advise teachers on the cut lists at some of the psychiatric hospitals' schools that they are likely to lose their jobs. Some teachers would remain at the hospitals to serve as facilitators and tutors.

"I do think that it's almost certain that those positions will be included in the cuts, so I think it is fair to give them some unofficial notice that this is likely to happen so they can look for jobs now when schools are hiring," Laura White, the Raleigh administrator who oversees the hospitals, wrote in a June 12 e-mail to the hospital directors.

The programming coordinator at Central Regional outlined in a memo how education would be rolled into a day where most of patients' time would be spent getting treatment for their illnesses.

Adolescents would attend school two hours a day, and younger children would go to school for 2.5 hours a day.

Vicki Smith, executive director of the patient advocacy group Disability Rights North Carolina, said it is not clear that the new plan would comply with federal special education laws and state codes.

"We have some serious concerns about the legality of doing that," Smith said. Children hospitalized for more than a week "should be provided an education," she said.

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Hospitalization trends

More young patients are admitted to the hospitals for short stays, but some are still hospitalized for weeks. For example:

At Dorothea Dix last year, about 35 percent of the adolescents discharged had been in the hospital a week or less, while about 20 percent had been there more than a month.

In 2003, 22.5 percent of young patients were discharged from Dorothea Dix after stays of a week or less, and about 22 percent were discharged after staying longer than a month.

Systemwide, 67 adolescents were in state hospitals on June 23, and 43 had been there for more than a month.