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Foundation urges stronger oversight for online schools

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By Berny Morson, Rocky Mountain News

Online schools would face stronger state oversight under recommendations released Thursday by a private foundation.

The report by the Donnell- Kay Foundation calls for creation of a new division within the Colorado Department of Education to regulate online programs.

The report does not recommend closing the 79 "learning centers" operated by the Hope Co-op Online Learning Academy. But Hope would have to improve coordination with school districts in which the centers are located.

The report was authored by a committee chaired by University of Colorado assistant law school dean Lorenzo Trujillo.

Sen. Sue Windels, D-Arvada, the chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, has said the report will be the basis for a bill she will introduce, probably next week.

Hope officials could not be reached for comment Thursday.

Online schools were the subject of a critical report by state auditors in December. Much of that criticism centered on Hope. The school is headquartered in Centennial, but is chartered by the Vilas School district in southeast Colorado.

Some educators have questioned whether the tiny Vilas district, with an enrollment of about 100 students, can adequately oversee Hope, with more than 3,800 students.

The auditors criticized Hope for failing to conduct required background checks on personnel. Some state funds were also being channeled to religious schools, which operate learning centers as subcontractors, the auditors said.

Hope officials say the violations have since been corrected. Hope earlier this week contracted with the Douglas County school district to help conduct quality evaluations of the learning centers.

Under the recommendations released Thursday, all online schools would have to employ qualified teachers. Hope centers are staffed primarily by "mentors," who do not hold state teaching certificates.

morsonb@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-954-5209