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Panel to eye problems with online education

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By Berny Morson

The state Board of Education on Wednesday named a 16-member panel to look into problems facing online education.

The panel includes educators, legislators and people who work with online programs.

Co-chairs will be Sen. Nancy -Spence, R-Centennial, and former board of education member Jared Polis of Boulder, a Democrat.

The panel comes after a state audit report in December critical of online programs, particularly the fast-growing Hope Online Learning Academy Co-op. Problems cited in the report included failure to conduct background checks on workers and the channeling of public funds to church schools.

The panel appointed Wednesday is expected to move quickly to make recommendations, said board chairwoman Pamela Jo Suckla.

Hope, which operates under a charter issued by the Vilas school district in southeastern Colorado, has 79 learning centers throughout the state. After 18 months of operation, the system, headquartered in Centennial, enrolls more than 3,700 students.

Many school officials and state legislators questioned whether the learning centers are under adequate supervision.

Earlier this week, another panel studying online education heard from parents and students who say the programs help kids who were failing in traditional schools.

"At (Denver's) Manual (High School) they would say, 'OK, you don't want to do your work, fine,' " said Bianca Tapia, 16.

At the Hope program she now attends, "everything is harder, but they push you so you can understand it," said Tapia.

Tapia addressed a commission formed by the private Donnell-Kay Foundation. The panel is chaired by University of Colorado Law School Assistant Dean Lorenzo Trujillo. It will issue draft recommendations on Jan. 26.

Sen. Sue Windels, D-Arvada, has said the Trujillo commission's recommendations will be the starting point for legislation she will introduce by the end of February.

Windels said she was disappointed by the testimony presented to the commission.

"I thought I would hear more testimony advising the commission of what an accountability system should look like in Colorado," Windels said. "Instead, I heard a lot of defense of the validity of online education, which I don't feel anybody questioned."

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