

State: Hartford Schools Did Not Provide Required Services For Those With Learning Disabilities

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The state Department of Education has found that the Hartford public school system has failed to provide proper educational services to students with learning disabilities.

The department's bureau of special education found that special education students attending city schools waited months and sometimes more than a year to receive neuropsychological, reading, assistive technology and speech and language evaluations or consultations.

The bureau made its findings after investigating complaints filed in March by Greater Hartford Legal Aid and the Center for Children's Advocacy. The complaint outlined more than a dozen instances in which required student evaluations were delayed for months and, in one case, for more than a year.

"The secondary specialized evaluations were not being followed through in a timely manner," Hannah Benton, an attorney with the children's center, said Friday.

Mary Jean Schierberl, an education consultant for the state Department of Education, investigated the complaints and found that the city schools failed to implement in a timely manner the recommendations of planning and placement teams that determine what evaluations students need and, therefore, was in violation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Schierberl found that the city schools could be poised to repeat the violation because it has no assistive technology provider or neuropsychologist in place.

In April, Ellen Stoltz, then director of special education services for the district, responded in writing to Schierberl. Stoltz defended the district, saying that much of the delay was caused by a shortage of qualified evaluators. Stoltz said the schools were aware of the difficulties in hiring evaluators and had made "observable attempts" to find them.

David Medina, a spokesman for the schools, declined to comment Friday.

Schierberl ruled that the city schools must make immediate arrangements to provide qualified evaluators, provide her office with weekly reports, conduct reading evaluations on a weekly basis and consider compensatory educational services for students denied timely evaluations.

"We expect that the state will ensure that students in Hartford schools receive the educational services they are entitled to," Benton said.

In the past six years, at least four formal complaints have been filed against the city schools by parents, child advocacy groups and state agencies over special education programs.

Milly Arcinieagas, president of the Hartford Parent Organization Council, a consortium of city PTOs, said Friday that she would recommend that the board of education reconstitute a special education task force to monitor the district's compliance. "We gave them two years and we're right back where we started again," Arcinieagas said. "These children cannot afford this."