

State to Hartford Schools: Fix Special Ed Services

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HARTFORD —

The state Department of Education has ordered the city school system to draft a plan by Nov. 15 that will show how it intends to remedy ongoing problems in providing educational services to students with emotional or behavioral problems.

The order comes more than five years after the department first found that city schools were not complying with federal and state requirements related to special education. Since then, the schools have received several more complaints that prompted a team of evaluators to spend time in more than a dozen city schools last December and compile a report on what they found.

The evaluators concluded that many of the issues identified in 2005 still existed and they also found other problems in special education services, including delays in transferring student files between schools, issues with out-of-district placements and inconsistent use of data in implementing individual education plans.

The evaluation also found that the way the school system accounted for special education spending often meant that funding did not follow individual students when they transferred to another school.

Evaluators made eight recommendations to correct the problems, including improving the method of transferring student records and individual education plans between schools. They also recommended hiring additional staff for special education services and conducting a survey of parents to evaluate progress.

The education department's order also requires the district to take \$250,000 of the federal and state money it receives through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to pay for someone to monitor the district's progress over the next two years. It also calls for the "conditional release" of the city's \$6.6 million allocation under the act on a schedule based on "the details of the final action plan."

Phyllis Mackey, whose grandson, Don, received special education services in Hartford for nearly a decade before he left the school system, praised the order Wednesday and said that "it's about time the board of education does what it's supposed to do for kids with disabilities."

Superintendent Christina Kishimoto, in a letter dated Oct. 17 to state Education Commissioner Stefan Pryor, said that "it is evident that the Hartford Public Schools has to take a systemic approach to building and retaining capacity, processes and services in special education." Kishimoto also outlined a plan to address the evaluators' recommendations and included a timetable for completing the plan by Nov. 15.

At Tuesday's board of education meeting, Kishimoto said that she created a committee at the beginning of the school year to work on compliance issues and was stepping up efforts to fill two key vacant positions — an executive director in the special education department and a director of special education services to help the schools' case management load.

"I am dedicated to responding to this well, quickly, and making sure we're no longer in noncompliance in the short term, but also permanently," Kishimoto said. "I don't ever want the Hartford public schools issued a non-compliance report again. ... My goal is to have us go from being in noncompliance to being in a situation where we are a model district in providing special ed services. And that's where we should be."

Hannah Benton, an attorney for the Center for Children's Advocacy, which has brought many of the complaints against the city schools, said Wednesday that her organization is "hopeful that the scope and breadth of this report signals more active oversight by the State Department of Education, which will result in improved outcomes for Hartford students with disabilities."