

Special Ed Complaint Filed Against City Schools

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BRIDGEPORT -- A complaint was filed Friday with the state Department of Education on behalf of parents of six city children whose disabilities have gone unidentified and unevaluated in the school district, according to the Hartford-based Center for Children's Advocacy.

The watchdog group filed the complaint after months of meetings between its attorneys and city school officials. Kathryn Meyer, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy, said in a written statement that the district's "lack of positive movement on this issue" left it with no other option than to file the complaint.

"Without a change, they have little hope of getting the special education services they are entitled to by law," Meyer said.

Robert Arnold, executive director of special services for the district, said he just learned of the complaint late Friday and was not yet prepared to comment. He acknowledged the district has met with the advocacy group and believed all of their concerns had been met "to a `T.' "

Schools Superintendent Paul Vallas said it is highly suspicious that the 90-page complaint, based largely on cases he inherited, was filed late on a Friday and two weeks before a school board election without any advance notice to the district.

"We take special education extremely seriously. It is one of the most important things we do," said Vallas, describing himself as a former special education student. Vallas said his office has worked for the better part of the year with the Center for Children's Advocacy "to clean up old files" and to address all of its complaints. None of those cases, he said, involved the specific children mentioned in the complaint filed in Hartford.

Special education in the city has changed dramatically since Vallas arrived nearly two years ago. The district stopped automatically assigning complex special education students to out-of-district placements, even though the district is spending more on special education this year than it did last year, Vallas said.

Meyer said the six families actually represent a much larger group of students who have not been evaluated for eligibility for support services, including those that can help with academic achievement and keep them on track to graduate from high school.

Edwin Colon, another attorney for the Center for Children's Advocacy, said the district "has shown a pervasive practice of failing to identify children whose academic and social failures clearly indicate potential disabilities."

The watchdog group describes one child who has struggled since first grade and repeated sixth grade when he failed every subject.

"In spite of these very serious red flags, Bridgeport schools never held a meeting to discuss (the student's) suspected educational or emotional disabilities or potential support services that might help him academically," Colon said.

Another student, who transferred from Florida with a Individual Education Plan that called for a structured, therapeutic classroom placement, was instead placed in a regular classroom, despite his mother's protest, the Center for Children's Advocacy said.

"Jonathan essentially lost an entire year of instruction until the Center for Children's Advocacy was able to secure Bridgeport's cooperation and appropriate class placement," Colon said.

According to the watchdog group, the district has failed to promptly refer students suspected of disabilities to Planning and Placement Team meetings as mandated by state law and failed to implement IEPs within an appropriate time frame, both in violation of federal laws.

The state Department of Education has 60 days to investigate and issue a written decision on each allegation.