

Bridgeport parents ask state to investigate district's handling of special education

By Jacqueline Rabe Thomas
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A group of Bridgeport parents has filed a complaint with the state about the district's "systemic failure" in educating students with disabilities.

"In sum, [Bridgeport] failed to meet their obligation," reads the 11-page complaint filed late last week with the State Department of Education.

The complaint highlights the stories of six students and their parents, who have either struggled to get their children evaluated for special education services, or whose children have faced delays in receiving those services.

While the attorneys representing the students say things changed once they got involved after waiting for years for services, they worry about all the other Bridgeport students who can't afford an attorney.

"We are concerned about those not represented by counsel. This is a chronic and pervasive problem," said Edwin Colon, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy, which represents children from low-income families throughout the state. "It wasn't until we became involved as attorneys that we saw some action."

Lisa, whose name was changed for privacy, is one of these students.

Even though Lisa had been hospitalized multiple times for hurting herself and constantly missing school after being bullied at Harding High School, the complaint says the district routinely denied requests that she be evaluated for special accommodation.



Three of the six students in the complaint filed against the Bridgeport school system attend Harding High School.

"For a period of over two years [Bridgeport] failed to accept and process a referral from the student's guardian to determine the student's eligibility for special education," the complaint reads.

Although Rob Arnold, executive director for specialized instruction in Bridgeport, said he wouldn't want to dismiss the complaints as inaccurate, he did say that the district is heavily focused on special education and is improving.

"Everybody is working really hard," he said during an interview. "We have to agree to disagree at some points. There are always going to be complaints."

Roughly 3,100 students in Bridgeport -- about 1 in 10 -- have special education plans, a rate that is about the same as the statewide average, according to the most recent data from the State Department of Education.

Since Paul Vallas took over as superintendent nearly two years ago, several changes have been made in how special education is provided.

In addition to sending fewer students to specialized schools outside the district, Arnold said the school system has opened programs to accommodate students with autism, and it has also opened almost 20 classrooms that accommodate special education students in small settings. These changes have saved the district millions.

"I was shocked by the complaint," said Arnold, who said he thought the district had turned a corner and is providing better special education services.

But Colon, the students' lawyer, said the changes are not enough. "There have not been substantial improvements," he said. "We think these stories speak for themselves."

Another student had received special education services in Florida. When he enrolled in Dunbar School in Bridgeport, he was denied similar accommodations for months as he waited to be evaluated to determine what services he needed.

"These are cases happening now," Colon said, dismissing Bridgeport officials' criticism of the timing of the complaint.

A contentious Bridgeport school board election will take place Tuesday.

"I have been working on this for a year with little to no traction or progress. No real action has been taken," Colon said, pointing out that complaints can only be filed for up to a year after the alleged offense took place.

The State Department of Education has 60 days to determine if it will launch an investigation.

A spokeswoman for the department said in a written statement: "the Bureau of Special Education has received the complaint. It is currently going through the Bureau's process for review."