

State: Bridgeport “systemically violated” special education laws

By Jacqueline Rabe Thomas
January 24, 2014

State investigators have concluded that the state’s largest public school system “systemically violated” state laws created to ensure students with special education needs are promptly identified and provided services.

“It is concluded that, over the last year, the Bridgeport Public Schools systemically violated its Child Find mandate,” Mary Jean Schierberl, with the state Department of Education’s Bureau of Special Education, wrote the district’s special education director this month.

“It is therefore concluded the District has no policies in place to monitor students’ behavior and performance to ensure all students with disabilities are located and identified. The District does not have an effective screening mechanism or policy in place to ensure that all students who need or are suspected to need special education and related services are identified, and evaluated.”

These findings are the result of a group of Bridgeport parents' filing a complaint with the state alleging that the district failed their six children for years as the parents struggled to get them evaluated for special education services. And once identified as needing special services, the students faced delays, parents complained.

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.

“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.

The CT Mirror's requests to Bridgeport’s school system for comments on the state’s findings went unanswered Friday.

During an interview when the complaint was filed in October, a district official said Bridgeport is focused on improving special education and was "shocked" by the allegations.

“Everybody is working really hard,” said Rob Arnold, executive director for specialized instruction in Bridgeport. “We have to agree to disagree at some points. There are always going to be complaints.”

The state told district officials Jan. 9 that they have three weeks to create a plan to resolve the problems and submit it to the state Department of Education. They also note that the district needs to prepare for an increased number of meetings that will surely be necessary to evaluate students and meet with parents to plan a strategy to accommodate their needs.

“Corrective action is required,” the state investigator wrote.

Attorneys representing the parents and students in the case applauded the state's findings.

“Every year we saw the failures getting worse rather than better, despite our repeated legal actions on behalf of individual clients. School staff often shared our frustrations, which were exacerbated by the ever-dwindling numbers of support staff, such as social workers, guidance counselors and psychologists.

“We knew that we had to do something on a larger scale in order to effect the change needed for all Bridgeport kids,” said attorney Kathryn Meyer, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy.