BRIDGEPORT — The city school system’s delivery of services to special education students is under fire again — and is accused of failing to provide individual plans for its most vulnerable students.

Late Thursday, the Center for Children’s Advocacy, a watchdog group with offices in the city, filed a complaint, the second in two years, with the state Department of Education on behalf of eight children, asking the state to intercede.

In the 21-page document, the center details numerous examples of neglect from the past school year, including the case of a special needs child attending a summer program in the district who for two weeks straight came home with a soaked diaper because no one changed it. When the child’s mother went to see what was going on, the only adult in the class was a paraprofessional.

In another case, the district is accused of failing to provide even minimal required speech and language services to a 17-year-old Central High School student who suffered neonatal meningitis as an infant. The condition left him with multiple disabilities including seizures, the inability to speak and limited movement.

Another special education classroom was described as failing even to have cots or blankets at nap time, forcing children to rest on a dirty floor. In a fourth case, a 16-year-old with anxiety and emotional issues was improperly placed into a special education class where students aggressively acted out, the complaint said. It said there was no where else to place the student.

Interim Schools Superintendent Fran Rabinowitz said the specifics of the renewed complaint have not yet been shared with her and come as a shock.

“I am not going to respond with excuses,” Rabinowitz said. “These presented scenarios are unacceptable.”

Rabinowitz said she called a meeting of her staff Friday afternoon to address the issues.

The new complaint comes nearly two years after a similar complaint by the center led to a state determination that the district was violating its obligation identify and provide proper services for students under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. At the time, former Schools Superintendent Paul Vallas, who was trying to contain special education costs, was in charge.
As a result, the district revamped its so-called Child Find system to identify, locate and evaluate students who may need special education services because they are chronically failing, misbehaving or absent. In June, Rabinowitz told the board that progress was being made, with interventions conducted on 78 percent of some 1,828 identified children. She also reported 900 fewer chronic absences.

“We have taken corrective action,” Rabinowitz said.

But it’s not enough, according to the new complaint, which also cited the district for failing to adequately train its special education teachers and aides or provide them with enough resources.

“These are our most vulnerable students and they should be a priority,” Edwin Colon, an attorney for the center, said. “It is inexcusable for Bridgeport Public Schools to ignore state and federal requirements and direction to identify and support these children.” The center has a new list of recommendations asking for services to be provided within 30 days for all the examples cited, and to seek outside sources to provide services where the district can’t. It also wants a three-year corrective action plan published for all to see.

Colon said the state has 60 days to conduct an investigation on the charges, issue findings, and develop its own corrective action plan if deemed warranted.

Kelly Donnelly, chief of staff for the state education department, said a review of the complaint is underway.

“If we do find issues or concerns regarding our students’ well-being or learning needs, we work with the district to ensure that such issues are appropriately addressed,” she said.

According to the complaint, Bridgeport spends the least on special education among its peer urban school districts. The audit also found the funds it does have are not being used effectively.

Still, Rabinowitz said she refuses to hide behind the excuse of inadequate funding.

“There are no excuses,” she said. “These are our children and they deserve to have a quality education.”