

## Report: Bridgeport schools failing special education students

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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.

### Examples

Some examples cited by the Center for Children's Advocacy in their latest complaint over the Bridgeport Public School's handling of special education students:

A 4-year-old student diagnosed with autism came home for two weeks from a summer special education program in the same diaper he left in. He also wasn't eating because no one fed him. No one had his Individualized Education Plan, and he was in the wrong classroom. When the mother visited to see what was going on, her son was sitting on a desk, rocking back and forth, hitting himself in the head with both fists. A paraprofessional was the only adult in the classroom. The teacher, she was told, was unavailable.

A 14-year-old student, classified as emotionally disturbed, was suspended for more than 15 days and subject to almost daily discipline referrals for conduct related to his disability. A Planning and Placement Team meeting determined he should be placed in a small, therapeutic classroom environment. More than 60 days after the recommendation, no steps were taken to put him in such a program and he continued to get suspended.

A 13-year-old student determined to be eligible for special education services in 2009 received minimal services and frequent suspensions. A September 2014 PPT meeting determined he was more impaired than anyone had realized. Because he was being bullied and physically assaulted, his father asked that he be placed in a therapeutic setting. The district denied the request. He continues to make little progress.

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 to 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.

When Rabinowitz took over, the district had an external special education audit conducted, which found procedural violations and a poor allocation of resources. It determined that only 39 percent of special education students whose files were audited were getting educational benefit from the services the district provided for them.

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."

*[cpost.com/news/article/Report-Bridgeport-schools-still-failing-special-6431066.php](http://cpost.com/news/article/Report-Bridgeport-schools-still-failing-special-6431066.php)*