

Bridgeport schools to set up hotline

By Linda Conner Lambeck

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BRIDGEPORT — A special education hotline will be established in the wake of two major complaints against Bridgeport's school district.

The hotline, an anonymous way for parents and staff to report suspected violations of state and federal special education laws, was proposed by the Board of Education's new, temporary member, Kate Rivera.

A special education advocate, Rivera was voted on the panel to fill a vacancy until new board members are elected and sworn in later this fall.

"In my experience I am often taken aside and told things off the record," Rivera said.

"Some staff don't feel safe reporting what they know is happening that is wrong. (A hotline) would allow incidents to be reported."

A plan to rekindle a special education parent group, also proposed by Rivera, was referred to the board's Students and Families Committee after some board members insisted on first consulting with parents.

The actions came as the school board heard from its attorney on how the district is responding to a complaint lodged by the Center for Children's Advocacy on behalf of eight children, alleging that the district is systematically delaying or neglecting proper services to special education students.

Leander A. Dolphin, an attorney who has been working with the district on special education issues for years, told the board that not all of the allegations are accurate, but that the district takes the complaints seriously and acknowledges there are problems caused by a lack of resources, proper record-keeping and staffing.

"We are working on a plan that will have immediate and long-term goals," Dolphin said.

The state has offered to provide the district with more teacher training, but at the moment no additional funds, Interim Schools Superintendent Fran Rabinowitz said.

Board member Sauda Baraka, who supported both of Rivera's ideas, said the district can use an ombudsman to field complaints from the hotline.

"I think it is an excellent opportunity to catch things early," she said.

Others questioned how the hotline would work. Rabinowitz asked for two weeks to work out the details, but called the hotline a good idea.

So did Kathryn Meyer, an attorney for the group that lodged the complaints against the district.

"The hotline will allow staff to have greater voice in the care of the children they serve," Meyer said. "Teachers are often in the best position to comment on their students' needs and whether they are being met."

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