

Bridgeport School Board to Audit Special Ed Policies

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BRIDGEPORT -- The city school district will conduct a special education audit following a state report that found it systematically failed to identify students eligible for special education.

The state has yet to say if the district's proposed corrective action plan is sufficient, but it was not enough to satisfy several Board of Education members who met in special session last week with district officials.

"Is this the plan that got sent? Wow." Jacqueline Kelleher, board vice chairwoman and a professor of special education asked, holding up a letter by Sandra Kase, a top district administrator. The letter said the district has not been implementing the state's Child Find Law, in place since 2006, which requires schools to proactively investigate whether students with chronic absences, academic failure or behavioral issues have special education needs.

"It seems like we are not looking at this as a problem," Sauda Baraka, the board chairwoman, added. "We have a problem and we have to fix it."

Last fall, the Center for Children's Advocacy filed a complaint on behalf of six children whose special education needs went undiagnosed or treated, in violation of both Child Find and the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The state ruled in the center's favor in January and ordered the district to submit a corrective action plan by Jan. 27, 2014.

In the cover letter to a draft plan provided to the board, Kase called it curious that the center didn't file a complaint before January 2012, when she and now-departing School Superintendent Paul Vallas arrived. At the time, she wrote, there was no plan in place and struggling students were simply promoted.

"We have taken giant steps to correct the ills of the past," Kase wrote. "The district now has in place a sound plan and procedures to ensure that no student falls through the cracks again."

Kelleher, however, said the district can't use new Scientific Research-Based Interventions, which was mentioned several times in the district's response to the state, as a substitute Child Find. The interventions give extra support to students who are struggling academically or behaviorally.

"SRBI is for general education students. It was never intended to hold up Child Find process," Kelleher said. "Please tell me that is not what we are doing, moving forward."

Amy Marshall, the district's chief academic officer, said Child Find is a general education initiative, too.

Rob Arnold, director of specialized instruction for the district, told the board that moving forward, any student with more than 15 unexcused absences, who fails more than two core courses or is involved in five or more behavioral incidences will be referred to Child Find. The district also plans to do a better job publicizing the law and training staff to carry it out.

Baraka said a bigger issue for her is that even when students are identified, they are not getting all the services

they need.

The audit, he said, would look at all special education programs and staffing levels. Requests for proposals have gone out and the hope is to get it done before the end of the school year.

Incoming interim Superintendent of Schools Frances Rabinowitz, who was at the session, liked the idea of an audit, but suggested the proposed \$30,000 price tag might not be enough. A special education audit she conducted for Hamden, which has 6,000 students, cost \$38,000. Bridgeport has nearly 21,000 students.

She said fixing special education in Bridgeport schools would be her first priority.

"I see it as a serious issue and an opportunity," Rabinowitz said. "Child Find is one piece of a larger issue." Rabinowitz said the district doesn't have the resources it ought to have to provide the services students should have.

Kelleher, who has two sons with special needs, said she found excellent services at Bassick, but is concerned that some things are "starting to fray at the seams. ... The district is putting budgetary needs before programming needs. That is against the law," she said.

<http://www.ctpost.com/local/article/School-board-to-audit-special-ed-policies-5260757.php>