

# CONNECTICUT POST

BRIDGEPORT SCHOOLS

## Special education families demand better services Parents say some students set up to fail

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BRIDGEPORT — Jackson, nearly 8, will never set foot in Tisdale School again.

His mother, who asked that their real names not be used, made that vow after her autistic, nonverbal son spent two weeks in the wrong classroom this summer.

The mom learned of the error when she went unannounced to the school to find out why her son was coming home every day in a diaper the size of a balloon, crying and hungry.

"They bring me to this room no bigger than this," Jackson's mom said, shaking in anger as she extended her arms the length of a closet. There, she said, she found Jackson sitting on top of a desk, banging his fists against his ears.

The classroom aide didn't know what to tell the mom. The teacher wasn't there. Other children in the class were high-functioning. No one had seen Jackson's records. So the mom marched her son down to the school system's central office, only to be sent back to Tisdale with the promise someone would call. No one did. The following Monday, Jackson was put back in the same, wrong classroom.

Jackson's mother is one of eight parents so fed up with the way special-education services are being delivered in the Bridgeport school district they sought the aid of the Center for Children's Advocacy. Earlier this month, the Center filed a complaint against the school system with the State Department of Education — its second in two years.

Beyond Jackson's situation, other cases described in the new complaint — and in false names here — include Cliff, a 17-year-old, non-verbal, multiply disabled student whose mother said he no longer gets speech and language services at Central High School because "they told me it was doing no good." And Junior, 14, who started getting bullied and into trouble the minute he transitioned to a regular classroom at Curiale School.

"He was targeted because he was different," said Junior's father, who like the other parents, requested their real names not be used. Junior's father said his son's transition was too fast and without proper support. A subsequent evaluation found Junior also had intellectual disabilities not previously diagnosed.

### AN ISSUE OF QUALITY

Edwin Colon and Katherine Meyer, attorneys at the Center for Children's Advocacy with offices in Bridgeport, said while the group's 2013 complaint represented a cut-and-dry effort to make sure the district followed laws to actively identify students with special needs, this complaint is more complex and harder to fix.

It focuses on the quality of education the district's 4,201 identified special-needs students receive.

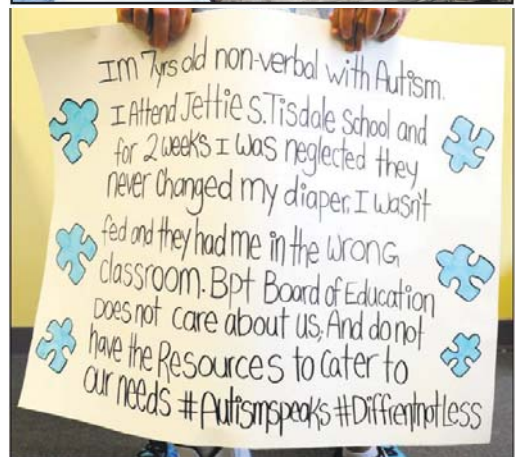
The first complaint led to a district-initiated audit of its special-education programs that found that only 39 percent of special-education students whose files were checked were getting educational benefit from the services the district gave them. The audit also found Bridgeport spends \$2,000 less per student than its peer districts. The district spends 31 percent of its operating budget — about \$74 million — on special education, but its budget is much smaller than those of other districts its size.

Meyer said the audit offered hope that the district was trying to make things better. But ultimately, she said, many recommendations in the 99-page report — things that should cost little or no money — are not happening.

The district promised more robust paraprofessional training. That, district officials said, won't occur until this November. To better allocate resources, the report called for the district to create six zones each with a special-education administrator. The district created only four.

Interim Schools Superintendent Fran Rabinowitz said the district is following the audit's advice to the best of its ability. Staff, she said, have been trained to write better individualized education programs, or IEP's, for special-needs students. The district paid for a handful of classroom teachers to get special-education certification. And the files of 10 student in each sector are being pulled monthly to determine if the district is in compliance.

"The majority are," Rabinowitz said. "I am not denying issues. We have issues. I have tried in a very focused way to ad-



Autumn Driscoll / Hearst Connecticut Media  
The mother of an autistic boy placed in the wrong special education class is among parents named in a complaint against the Bridgeport School District brought by the Center for Children's Advocacy.

dress them in the time I have been here.”

## HOST OF COMPLAINTS

The new complaint focuses on eight students of varying ages, disabilities and schools, but the attorneys say they are representative of numerous cases they have encountered where basic educational needs are not being met, leaving parents at their wits' end.

Jackson's problems at Tisdale were not his first within the district. He used to attend Hallen School and came home one day with a swollen foot no one at school or on the bus could explain, his mom said. He has been put into classes with more children than his IEP calls for, and more than once has managed to almost run away from his schools.

“My son is a runner. If not for a fourth-grader who stopped him, my son at the gate he could have been the next Avonte Oquendo,” Jackson's mom said, referring to the autistic teen from New York who in 2014 bolted from his school and was later found dead. Jackson's mom said she has come to the conclusion that Bridgeport is incapable of providing special-needs kids with the services they need.

“They should have their own school, their own environment,” she said. “He needs to be in a school where they can teach him to live with autism.”

Cliff's mom agrees. “He is not getting the education he needs, at all,” she said, as her son hummed, nonstop. Born with spinal meningitis, Cliff can walk with assistance at home, but in school is kept in a wheelchair. His IEP goals have remained the same for years.

“This is a kid who can make progress with the right services in place,” said Colon. “But (the) district took the approach, ‘We have been doing this for 10 years and he is not showing progress, so we can't educate him.’”

Cliff's mom wants him placed into Giant Steps, a private special-education school in Southport, where there is one-on-one therapy. The district has yet to agree to it.

Junior, meanwhile, who Meyer said was essentially set up to fail in a regular classroom, is finally making progress. With the Center's help, Junior received new neuro-psychological testing that allowed him to be placed in an out-of-district program.

“In Bridgeport- he was scared. He couldn't sleep. Now he is himself,” said his father. “He is doing a lot better.”

## WHAT NOW?

Rabinowitz disagrees with the contention that that the district cannot do well by students with special needs.

“I think we are capable,” she said. “We have very good people. I think we just need to face it, acknowledge what we have done well and create a corrective action plan that will establish the system and provide kids with scaffolding they need.”

Rabinowitz said her goal is not only to address the complaints of the eight students, but take a systemic approach to correct problems that have existed for years.

This time around, the Center for Children's Advocacy wants the state to put a monitor in place to make sure the district complies with whatever corrective action is imposed.

Charlene Russell Tucker, chief operating officer for the state Department of Education, said Bridgeport's special-education program had already been selected for focused monitoring this year. Now that effort will be ramped up to include an investigation, intervention and support, where it is deemed necessary.

“When we look at what is best for the welfare of students, we don't take cost into consideration,” Tucker said.