



## State Finds Norwalk Schools Violated Federal Special Education Law

By DAVID DESROCHES • JUL 24, 2019

A state investigation into Norwalk's special education program has found that the district has not been following federal law, but the findings reflect deeper problems that the district has faced for years.

The complaint that sparked the investigation was filed (by Center for Children's Advocacy attorney Kathryn Meyer, Norwalk Attorney Robin Keller, and Special Education advocate Jill Chuckas) on behalf of 14 Norwalk students, but Jill Chuckas, a special education advocate who filed the complaint along with two lawyers, said the problems impact all kids with disabilities in the district.

"This isn't about just these 14 children," Chuckas said. "This is a broader picture of what's been happening to children who have needs within the district."

The State Department of Education review found that the district wasn't providing services to some students -- even though the district said it was providing them. In some cases, students ended up regressing, or getting worse, Chuckas said.

One child needed reading services, but wasn't getting them.

"When it came to the point of filing the complaint, that child was about three, three-and-half years below grade level," she said.

The problems addressed in the state's report reflect over a decade of issues that the district has not been able to fix. The Capital Region Education Council, CREC, has reviewed Norwalk's special education program three different times going back to 2007. The latest one was in 2015, and it found the problems had gotten worse.

Chuckas said many Norwalk teachers want to do the right thing, but are hamstrung by the administration.

"It's very frustrating for me as an advocate and for my parents," she said. "Because you see that people want to do what's right, and they want to give their all to these kids, but their caseloads are so inherently high, or attention is put to different things that aren't coming to fruition, as I said, you know, programs that look nice on the outside but aren't necessarily implemented."

In an email, Norwalk's chief of specialized learning and student services, Yvette Goorevitch, said that "systemic issues related to the CREC report have been addressed."

"Norwalk is extremely proud of the improvements made to ensure effective procedures and practices to serve our children with special needs," Goorevitch said.

Norwalk had "independently taken several steps prior" to getting the state report, she added, including revising its procedures and creating a plan for supervising the program.

"Our work in this area is never complete," Goorevitch said. "We are monitoring, improving and evaluating program implementation constantly. The district, like the nation, is facing a shortage of special education teachers and other specialists."

She also expressed concern that the complaint has led to a "negative discussion" which "has a chilling effect on our recruitment and retention of our highly talented staff."

"Our challenge is to improve communication to heal the relationships and to change the discussion from mistrust to collaboration," she said.