



Advocates call on state to improve response to vulnerable students

EDUCATION by ADRIA WATSON JANUARY 21, 2021

Now that Connecticut officials have data showing just how much school the state's most vulnerable students are missing when they switch to remote learning, advocates are calling on Gov. Ned Lamont's administration to do something to close those gaps.

The data, which has been collected for months, shows that Connecticut's homeless, special education, low-income and English-learning students are missing up to twice as much school as their peers when they learn entirely from home and are also twice as likely to be learning remotely.

"We need to continue to drill down to understand the full impact for these students so that we can take the next steps to ensure access and the legal rights of all children, particularly our highest needs, to an education and urgently roll out an education recovery framework for these students," the state's child advocate Sarah Eagan said at a recent state Board of Education meeting. Joining Eagan was Martha Stone, director of the Center for Children's Advocacy.

The state has issued guidance for how districts can keep attendance up and students engaged, as well as resources for high-needs students. But **Eagan and Stone said what they are seeing and hearing from families is that some districts "flaunt the guidance" and choose not to follow it. Stone added that this is especially happening within special education**, and special education attorneys have said they see it too.

They are asking the state Department of Education to look more closely at its data to determine how students with disabilities are accessing education during the pandemic, especially those who have been learning remotely and are in opportunity districts.

The department started to release frequently updated data in the fall, looking at student participation and COVID in schools in an effort to keep track of where and how students are doing during the pandemic. As of Jan. 14, 1,462 new positive student cases and 463 new staff cases had been reported, and 46.7% of school districts were operating under a fully remote learning model during the week of Jan. 4-8.

According to the data, students from low-income families are twice as likely to be learning entirely from home. English learners and students experiencing homelessness are also much more likely to be learning entirely remotely. Across the board, students who are learning entirely remotely are likely to be absent more days. For example, students with physical or learning disabilities attending school in-person are missing twice as many days when they go remote.

"In districts in particular that have been remote for months at a time, we know that there are children with very significant disabilities — be it autism, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities — who are not able to access their education remotely," Eagan told the board. "It is imperative that we fully understand through an appropriate methodology, and auditing where necessary, the full impact of those school closures on our highest-needs students."

She and Stone have been asking since November for the state's education department and board of education to publicly discuss the state's strategy on this issue.

But concerns about whether vulnerable students are receiving a proper education are not limited to Connecticut. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights is reportedly investigating whether a handful of school districts have been providing appropriate education to students with physical or learning disabilities.

"According to one local news report last spring, the District told its special education teachers 'not to deliver specially designed instruction,' and disallowed them from 'adapt[ing] lessons to each child's needs,'" wrote the Education Department's acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights Kimberly M. Richey in a letter sent to Seattle Public Schools, according to The Seattle Times. "OCR [Office of Civil Rights] is concerned that the District has failed to provide a 'free appropriate public education' to each qualified student with a disability as required by federal law and denied students with disabilities equal access to education."

Miguel Cardona, the state's Education Commissioner and President Joe Biden's nominee to become the U.S. Education Secretary, met with those in the national disability community on Jan. 13 to discuss the impact of the pandemic on special-needs students. "Participants noted the disproportionate effects the pandemic has exacerbated for students with disabilities, particularly around access and equity," said a release from the president-elect's transition team about the meeting.

Back in Connecticut on the same day, Cardona also heard the concerns Eagan and Stone raised during a state Board of Education meeting about the same issues. During it, he said that the department has conversations with districts to make sure support is provided for in-person learning. He and Lamont have repeatedly said that while they encourage and want schools to stay open, reopening and closing decisions are left up to district officials.

"The Connecticut State Board of Education and Connecticut State Department of Education share the commitment of the Office of the Child Advocate and the Center for Children's Advocacy to ensure our most vulnerable populations have appropriate access to educational opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic," department spokesperson Peter Yazbak said in an email. He added that department leaders have had conversations with Eagan and Stone regarding their concerns prior to Wednesday's meeting and that the board's accountability and support committee will also be meeting with them soon to "continue the dialogue on these difficult but pivotal topics."

Republican lawmakers Vincent Candelora of North Branford and Kathleen McCarty of Waterford are also trying to combat similar concerns through legislation that would set up more requirements for districts to follow. Some of the legislation they are proposing would require state-supported teacher training for remote learning, in-person learning for students in special education and for the department to provide reviews of whether minimum standards are being met in districts.

"If school districts are forced to use hybrid learning in the future, either because of this virus or some other unforeseen situation, it is imperative that they have a clear set of minimum standards from the State Department of Education upon which to develop local plans," McCarty said in a statement. "Establishing minimum standards to align in-person and remote learning, assuring special needs students' individual needs are being met, and providing the proper overview from the state level to make sure these standards are met will improve learning for all students."