



State Finds Half Of Bridgeport Schools Don't Have Enough Special Education Teachers; We Found Other Districts With The Same Issue

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Dametria Codrington noticed pretty quickly last school year that her son Stephen was just sitting in front of a blank computer screen for a large chunk of his day.

"He would always say, 'I'm not in class.' I'm like, 'Why are you just sitting there? Why I don't hear nobody?' It was always the teacher for his special service class wasn't in."

This went on for almost a year -- despite her begging the Bridgeport school district to find a special education teacher for her then-eighth grader, who has ADHD and a learning disability.

"If I didn't see what was going on while he was learning remote, I would have probably never known, never seen any of it," she said.

When his school reopened, "They just put him in the back of the class while this other class was doing their work with their teachers," Codrington said. "He wasn't on those kids' math levels. ... He probably don't want to make it seem like, 'I'm dumb.' So it bothers me that he had to feel that way. He's in high school learning multiplication."

While remote learning opened Codrington's eyes to what was going on with her 14-year-old son's education, staff shortages have perplexed high-poverty districts throughout Connecticut for years. That's because districts like Bridgeport struggle to keep their teachers from leaving for suburban districts, where the pay is often higher and class sizes smaller.

"We're in a critical time here in Connecticut," said Bridgeport Superintendent Michael Testani. "Teacher shortages and being able to fill teacher vacancies are becoming in a crisis mode. We make every effort, but we are unable to compete financially with other districts."

Almost a month into this school year, Bridgeport still has 16 special education teaching positions it needs to fill. Statewide, between 95 and 250 teaching positions go unfilled each year. [Most](#) are in high-poverty districts.

An [analysis](#) of state data by Connecticut Public shows that while the number of children with disabilities has increased significantly over the last 10 school years, staffing in high-poverty districts has not kept pace.

"If we don't enact some sort of legislation specifically to pay teachers, this is going to be detrimental," said Testani. "We're going to find that we're not going to be able to fill positions more and more as the years go on. And kids are going to have a revolving door of substitute teachers, which to me is criminal."

The state is well aware of the problem.

The impact this shortage is having on students in one of those high-poverty districts is outlined in the state Department of Education's recent [investigation](#) into Bridgeport that found shortfalls in special education staffing in more than half the schools. The department's investigation was brought on by a group of parents who filed a complaint against the district.

Kathryn Meyer, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy who filed the systemic [complaint](#) with Connecticut Legal Services, said that even for children who do have a teacher the caseloads are not manageable.

"To say that person is covering is just, it's just false. There's just no way," Meyer said. "And they'll tell you that. They're like, 'I can't even keep up with my own caseload.'"

In the wake of the state's investigation, Bridgeport has been ordered to meet with every parent whose child didn't have a special education teacher last school year to determine if that student needs a tutor, after-school programs or other supports to make up for the lost instruction.

The issue has been going on for years. A [report](#) commissioned by the education department in 2019 titled "The State of the Connecticut Teacher Workforce" outlined how wealthier towns hired much more special education staff as the number of students with disabilities increased. For example, wealthy districts hired a new special education teacher for every 14 additional special education students enrolled, compared to a new teacher for 49 students in poor districts.

This is the [third time in eight years](#) that the state has found systemic problems standing in the way of special-need students in Bridgeport getting what they require for them to make progress in school.

Codrington's son is proud of his mom for speaking up.

"He thinks it's cool what we have done, and he loves his math tutor. I wish we could have Randy forever," she said. "He's so excited to show me the work that he's completed. I look at it, I'm like, 'You didn't do this.' You know, I'm messing with him. He's like, 'yes.' I tell him, 'You go, boy,' and we fist-bump. And he's just so excited to show me things he learned."

Stephen now has a special education teacher, too. His mom hopes that doesn't change.

The state Department of Education was not available this week to be interviewed or respond to questions about staffing challenges in high-poverty districts or its investigation into Bridgeport.