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## State intervenes in Hartford's treatment of students with disabilities

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Concluding that Hartford Public Schools have failed to appropriately serve students with disabilities, the state Department of Education has ordered the city school system to evaluate students more quickly, implement the evaluations when they are completed, and assign staff to better track these students.

"The system has failed on a systemic basis" to meet the education plans of those with disabilities, wrote Mary Jean Schierlberl, a consultant whose report prompted the intervention, adding the district has violated federal disability law and "appears poised to repeat the violation."

Her report was prompted by a complaint by Hannah Benton, an attorney with the Center for Children's Advocacy, who says she acted on behalf of 11 students waiting for more than a year for services. Benton applauded the state's action.

"There was no progress being made on several of our clients cases, which reveal a much larger problem systemwide," she said.

This decision marks the third district in which the state has stepped in and ordered changes in recent months: first in Windham, and then in Bridgeport last month. This order requires Hartford Public Schools to regularly report to the SDE on its progress.

"If they see they are not moving children off this list of kids waiting for services, they can really step up the pressure," said Lynn Cochrane, with Greater Hartford Legal Aid who filed the complaint with Benton. "Hartford is really going to have to strive very hard to fix this. They know the state is watching now if they don't."

It is unclear just how many students with disabilities Hartford Public Schools have waiting for an evaluation to receive the appropriate education plan, but believes it's a system-wide problem at Hartford schools, said Benton.

Cochrane points to Adrian Lomax's son, who has been waiting 17 months for a reading evaluation, as an example of how Hartford is failing its disabled students.

"I hope this means that other Hartford students with disabilities won't have to wait as long and fight as hard as we did to get an education," Lomax said in a statement.

Hartford Public Schools Spokesman David Medina said the district has not yet received a copy of the decision and has no comment.

James McGaughey, the executive director of the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities, said the action was not unexpected.

"I'm not surprised," he said. "I think it's long overdue, but I'm glad the Department of Education is doing something about it now. I'd like to see Hartford make a serious effort to comply with the law by hiring or contracting people who have the expertise necessary to conduct those evaluations."

He said his office has also investigated cases where it believed some students in Hartford Public Schools with emotional disturbances or autism spectrum disorders weren't receiving the proper education programs.

"We've seen disciplinary responses to students who have well-documented emotional disturbance labels or autism spectrum disorders, instead of receiving the educational programs those students are entitled to," McGaughey said.

He said Hartford Public Schools also need to make more concerted efforts to pay attention to these issues in early elementary grades, instead of waiting until later grades when problems arise.

Education

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