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## SPEDWatch demonstrates for special education rights



The SPEDWatch protest was featured on the page 1 on the Boston Globe's City & Region Section

MALDEN – Vowing to fight on until the Massachusetts Department of Education (MASSDE) stops public schools from violating students' special education rights, a group of fifty parents, teachers and students protested in freezing temperatures outside MASSDE headquarters on January 17, 2008. All are members of SPEDWatch, a non-profit civil rights movement founded by Pepperell resident Ellen Chambers to secure the educational rights of the Commonwealth's schoolchildren with disabilities.

"Few people know that 90 percent of our schoolchildren with disabilities are every bit as intellectually capable as their non-disabled peers. But because schools routinely deny these kids the services they need in order to learn they are failing in huge numbers," says Chambers. There were 1,159 such violations documented by MASSDE during the most recent twelve month period for which data is available. The federal government has cited Massachusetts nine times in the last seventeen years for failing to fully meet its legal obligations to

these students. The achievement gap between students with and without disabilities averages 45 percentage points and that gap actually increased on every MCAS exam in every grade in 2007.

Chambers says, "Enough is enough. We know schools don't have the funds they need to do the job. But the answer to that cannot be to simply deny children their legal right to an education. Schools need to get tough with Beacon Hill and Congress and insist on being given the money that's needed.

Realistically, though, we know that's just not going to happen until some group steps up to the plate and exerts some real pressure. And that's where SPEDWatch comes in. We believe the pressure has to come from the parents of these children. Parents have been the critical missing variable in this equation."

SPEDWatch, founded in 2006, has spent the last two years talking to parents all over the state; to legislators, businesspeople, medical and human services professionals, and educational leaders including Dr. Dana Mohler-Faria, the Governor's Special Advisor on Education. They published a comprehensive review of these issues in a report called *Broken Promises: Special Education in Massachusetts*. "We're publicizing the issues and giving parents a place to organize and a way to speak in unison," explains Chambers.

"Parents try to advocate for their children but are easily outmaneuvered by administrators intent on containing costs. The result is that children suffer, terribly. Their futures are irretrievably damaged. We're not talking about a line item in a budget here, we're talking about flesh and blood human beings. This has got to stop and SPEDWatch is prepared to do whatever is necessary to see that it does stop. It's long past time," insists Chambers.