

JUNE 2007

SPEDWatch demonstrates at State House



SPEDWatch members demonstrate at the State House.



SPEDWatch is joined by Representative Barbara L'Italien (center, coral jacket).

BOSTON – It was cold, gray, and drizzling on June 13th but that didn't keep SPEDWatch members from gathering at the Massachusetts State House to demonstrate in support of special education rights.

SPEDWatch held their signs high, and chatted with interested passers-by about the organization and the sad state of special education in the Commonwealth. Sarah Chambers (daughter of founder Ellen Chambers) could be heard enthusiastically shouting "Defend SPED rights! We're worth it!"

After peacefully demonstrating for about 90 minutes, members then went into the State House to meet directly with their legislators. They talked about SPEDWatch and its work, and left each with a copy of the executive summary of the SPEDWatch report "Broken Promises: Special Education in Massachusetts."

Feedback from SPEDWatch Demonstrators

"We met with representatives for both Needham legislators. We were met with respect and the representatives were interested in hearing about SPEDWatch and in the report. They would like to be kept in the loop and up to date on future information."

"When Barbara L'Italien came out to speak with us I knew the group was being taken seriously. And I know you already have the attention of Tom Sannicandro. One couldn't wish for better allies. It definitely helped to have the office appointments. Without an appointment, someone will usually come out to speak with you for a few minutes, but this time I was invited in to sit down, and had the impression I had their attention."

"I spoke to Senator Pacheco. I was active in his campaign. I spoke with his aide - highlighted the

SPEDWatch information and said I was there to document noncompliance. He was very interested in [Ellen Chambers'] conversation with [Marcia] Mitnacht. Senator Pacheco said he was aware of our issues. I spoke with Representative Steve Canessa, [and] his aide. I had a yard sign for his campaign. Again, non-compliance, non-performance conversation about an autistic kid I advocate for. Started with SPEDWatch, showed non-compliance with that case. I will be following up."

"My meetings with Representative Casey and Senator Jehlen went well. Casey is not likely to go out of his way for us, but he will listen and will provide feedback on our efforts. For example, he said that the best way for SPEDWatch to succeed in terms of getting legislators on our side is to have a very specific agenda. Having a laundry list of items, or even just several items, is too much.

"Senator Jehlen was quite sympathetic. Her feedback on changing the Circuit Breaker formula, something for which I've long advocated, is that legislators will be reluctant to put energy into 'bringing home' funds for which they won't get credit from their constituents. What she meant was that since Circuit Breaker is a reimbursement, it doesn't appear on the 'cherry sheets.' Of course I told her that I'd publicize the heck of it for her, but I'm not sure that's enough! Something to think about."

"We met with Representative Walrath. It was a very positive meeting. She had a file on us with our emails on Hudson Parent Concerns and she recommended that we copy David Driscoll on the emails. I think something will come out of it."

"I went to Senator Hedlund's office without an appointment. A young man, [the] Senator's aide, greeted me very friendly. I told him why I was dropping by. He mentioned he too once had a[n IEP] plan and he understood some of the issues first hand. I expressed that I was a member of a new group that is working to improve conditions for children who are currently being left behind across the state, not just in my community. I thanked him for his time and I complimented him on his success despite having an ed plan, and noted his life experience could be a benefit to our group and help make a positive change for many children in this state."

"I met with Cynthia Creem's aide, and Kay Khan. I shared ... information ... and told them about the poor compliance with federal and state special ed laws and regulations. I described some of the problems in Newton and pointed out that it was worse in many other towns, but even in Newton, the law is sometimes ignored and only followed if parents speak up and strongly advocate.

"Both of them wondered what we wanted them to do - vote on a particular bill, etc. I said now we want them to be aware of the systemic non-compliance issues and the harm being done to kids and to our communities when uneducated students leave school. Kay's niece is her aide and was there, so we discussed especially her problems learning to read in Newton, and the particular urgency to teach kids to read. We also brought up the issues of our large prison population, many of whom did not get the services and education they needed and how expensive prison, DYS and court involvement are vs education.

"They seemed somewhat surprised and were very sympathetic. Mainly they wanted to know what they should do."

"We're very pleased with the demonstration. It was a very educational experience for the both of us. We feel we must try to do something for all children. Our meeting with Senator Moore was not the most satisfying. Though he and his associate, Mr. Hopp, were polite, and listened to our remarks and comments about what SPEDWatch was trying to accomplish, he did not seem like he was going to get passionate about the issues.

"When we asked what he was going to do about compliance issues, and the other points in the SPEDWatch handout ... his comments were though he was sympathetic to the cause, he said it would be difficult to accomplish because of decrease in revenues overall in the state. He said there wasn't enough money to go around. Both my husband and I are CPAs, and know that there [are] plenty of funds available, it's just how it is getting allocated. We did not want to be disrespectful towards him, but tried to politely say that the funding is there and needs to get channeled appropriately. We also said that we are a growing voice, and that these issues are not going away and will need to be addressed."

Feedback from Executive Director

SPEDWatch member Bill Wood, a veteran disability rights activist, arranged for Executive Director Ellen Chambers to meet Representative Paul Donato. Bill, Ellen, Representative Donato, and two other SPEDWatch members enjoyed a quick lunch together in the State House Café.

The meeting was a highly valued one because Representative Donato holds the influential position of Chair of the House Committee on Steering, Policy and Scheduling. As such he works very closely with Speaker of the House Sal DiMasi, prioritizing and scheduling major matters pending before the Legislature. Donato offered to arrange a meeting between Chambers and Representative Patricia Haddad, Co-Chair of the Legislature's Joint Committee on Education.

Chambers, was pleased with the turnout and the reception members received from their legislators. "We had 18 people come out to demonstrate and meet with legislators, and that's a respectable number for a first time demonstration. Sure, 118 people would have been better, but we have to keep in mind that all great movements start small. It just felt good to be out on the street, in the trenches, where the action is. There's no magic formula here – its still the squeaky wheel gets the grease, and staying in touch with those who hold power makes all the difference."