

MAY 2008

SPEDWatch demonstrates to 'welcome' new Commissioner



SPEDWatch students, parents, and teachers demonstrate for special education rights. May 2008

MALDEN – Dr. Mitchell D. Chester assumed the post of Education Commissioner on May 19th, and SPEDWatch was there to greet him outside the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MDESE) offices in Malden. Carrying signs demanding that the MDESE protect their educational rights, students joined parents and teachers to insist that they be given the education to which they are legally entitled. They came from towns as far away as Springfield, Danvers, and Taunton.

Ellen Chambers, SPEDWatch founder, said “These students have had a legal right to appropriate special education services for over 32 years. But never in all those years have those rights been upheld. Tens of thousands of students across Massachusetts are being denied their birthright as American citizens to an education that will allow them to develop their full potential.”

According to the MDESE there were 1,125 violations of students’ special education rights documented between July 2005 and June 2006. “That number hugely underestimates reality,” said Chambers, “because most violations go unreported.” According to Chambers the U.S. Department of Education has cited Massachusetts nine times in the past seventeen years for failing to meet its legal obligations to its students with special needs. The most recent instance came in June of 2007.

“What’s also appalling,” Chambers claimed, “is Massachusetts just submitted an application for \$263 million in federal special education funding

and gave the government a written statement of assurance that appropriate special education services are available to every eligible student in the state.”

Dr. Chester has agreed to meet with SPEDWatch next month. The group has already provided him with a copy of their comprehensive report *Broken Promises: Special Education in Massachusetts* which details noncompliance with special education law in the Commonwealth and its human consequences.

“We are hopeful that Dr. Chester’s arrival in Massachusetts will signal a turning point and that his will be the administration that finally addresses the terrible injustice that exists in our special education system,” said Chambers.

The group says they are prepared to continue their struggle for as long as it takes, decades if necessary, until the state corrects what it sees as educational neglect of students with disabilities. SPEDWatch currently has 360 members in 135 cities and towns across the state.



Springfield teacher Debra Askwith