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Group monitors special ed system

Holding schools to accountability

By Matt Gunderson, Globe Correspondent

Four years ago, Pepperell resident Ellen Chambers' daughter, Sarah, was struggling as a fourth-grader at Varnum Brook Middle School. Diagnosed with autism, Sarah used to scrawl notes on little pieces of paper and leave them in corners around the house, pleading with her parents for help.

Chambers knew her daughter needed an alternative, a place that would help rebuild her daughter's self-esteem, declining by the day, she said, because she had fallen so far behind academically.

Chambers said she found that place at the Murphy & Dwyer Academy, a private school in Chelmsford that caters to students with disabilities. There, with help of local public school district funding for tuition, Sarah received specialized instruction, which helped close her learning gap in 18 months, Chambers said.

Chambers considers herself lucky, but hasn't stopped combating a statewide system that, she claims, pulled her daughter into a downward spiral. In January, Chambers formed SpEdWatch, Inc., an organization that Chambers says is the state's first watchdog group on special education curriculums across the state.

Advocacy for individual special education students is not a new concept, but the idea of a proactive organization tackling systemic issues within special education is, said Chambers.

The group, which now has 66 members, all disgruntled parents from across the commonwealth, uses hard line publicity tactics, such as waging media campaigns and talking to local realtors, in an effort to warn incoming residents about school districts that have allegedly violated special education laws.

"This is much more aggressive" than other advocacy organizations, Chambers said.

Chambers, who holds a master's degree in business from Bentley College, said she worked 11 years in special education advocacy before quitting her job to form SpEdWatch. The organization, which has gained legal recognition as a nonprofit, has no headquarters, and she runs it from a makeshift office on her kitchen table at the moment.

She describes SpEdWatch as politically "messier" than her previous work, but necessary to bring about change in the system. "I think some people think this is a little crazy," she said. "But something different has to be tried."

Special education, one of the most controversial and sensitive educational issues in the state, has always been a thorny matter for school districts facing constrained revenue sources and ballooning class sizes annually. Students with severe disabilities can sometimes cost taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars annually, with districts receiving little or no compensation from the state.

Chambers said she recognizes the problem, but says districts still need to face the reality that their stated mission and charter is to educate all students. “They do have a right to be educated in their neighborhood schools,” she said.

Infractions of state laws can vary from district to district, but Chambers said that a common violation is administrators refusing to identify students who are eligible for special education, perhaps as a maneuver to cut costs.

“School districts will say this is absolutely false,” said Chambers. “I say it’s absolutely true.”

School administrators interviewed said they weren’t aware of their districts violating any special education laws.

North Middlesex Superintendent James McCormick said he is aware that some districts see a large influx of special education students during the course of a year and, due to scheduling constraints, are unable to enlist potentially eligible students. The problem has never surfaced at North Middlesex, but has occurred in other districts, he said.

McCormick also acknowledged that his district, in rare cases, may not be able to meet the needs of some students with severe disabilities.

“We try to meet every child’s needs, but, unfortunately, sometimes we can’t,” he said.

Reading Superintendent Patrick Schettini said he was not aware of any controversy in his schools surrounding special education. But he said Chambers’ concerns about eligible students slipping through the cracks was not plausible, mainly because parents can appeal a district’s decision on the issue to the state.

The system “is not failing because there’s a process in place,” said Schettini.

Chambers acknowledged there is a process, but said parents often do not have the finances to pay for an attorney to argue their case on appeal.

“You are talking \$10,000 to \$20,000, easy, to go through a hearing,” she said.

Chambers said the goal of her group is not to denigrate educators in the field, who may often provide high-quality regular education. Some teachers will secretly tell a parent that they should get their child tested for a learning disability, but “the word from the administration is you don’t do that,” she said.

“It’s not our intent to criticize what those educators are doing,” Chambers said. “We are finding fault with the system that doesn’t allow them to do what they want to do.”

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