

SPEDWatch meets with Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester



Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.
Massachusetts Commissioner
of Education

“My pledge to you is that we will ensure that our schools prepare our youngest citizens for opportunities in the 21st century. Our responsibility is to be vigilant in identifying and redressing our system shortcomings, wherever they exist.”

*From Dr. Chester's
Inaugural Remarks
May 19, 2008*

BOSTON – SPEDWatch Executive Director Ellen Chambers met with Massachusetts’ new Commissioner of Education, Dr. Mitchell Chester, for nearly an hour on June 12, 2008. Also at the meeting were State Representative Tom Sannicandro and Sylvia Smith, the Commissioner’s Director of External Partnerships.

Chambers presented the many serious concerns SPEDWatch has regarding the Commonwealth’s special education system including: high rates of regulatory noncompliance; a federal monitoring system that actually sanctions noncompliance; the high failure rate of students with disabilities; and the Department’s refusal to commit to reducing noncompliance.

Chambers pointed out that Massachusetts has been cited by the federal government 10 times in the last 18 years for failing to fully meet its legal obligations to its students with special needs. Despite this, the issue has never been addressed in any Annual Report filed by the Massachusetts Board of Education, nor in any Annual Report authored by the Board’s Advisory Council on Special Education (for the years 1995-2007.)

Chambers shared that SPEDWatch has heard from dozens of teachers who all want the same thing: the ability to advocate for their students with special needs without fear of retaliation from their administration.

Chester offered some broad comments about system-wide conditions and assured Chambers that he is aware of the issues and will be keeping a close eye on the situation.

At the conclusion of the meeting Chambers stressed that parents want a respected place at the table. They want the Department to take these issues seriously, and SPEDWatch wants to work collaboratively with Chester and his staff towards resolution of these serious problems.

Time will tell whether SPEDWatch was truly heard.