

## Advocacy group addresses discrepancies in special education

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March 25, 2008

WESTPORT — Federal and state laws say children with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate public education, but according to SpedWatch, there is a huge discrepancy between what the law says and what many districts are doing.

“The bottom line is that the feds have never enforced the law,” said Ellen Chambers, founder and director of SpedWatch, a statewide organization dedicated to compliance with special education laws.

Ms. Chambers gave a recent presentation to 40 area parents at White's of Westport. She said that although the federal government agreed in 1975 to contribute to 40 percent of special education costs, the actual contribution is 18 percent. “The whole burden gets shifted to cities and towns,” Mrs. Chambers said. “There is a huge, real financial pressure. SpedWatch understands that they don't have the money, but the answer can not be to deny a child an education.”

Despite the financial stress on districts, Ms. Chambers, who has read more than 500 individualized education plans (IEPs) during her years as an advocate, maintained that even wealthier communities have difficulties complying due to society's perception of those with disabilities.

According to Ms. Chambers, when the majority of people hear the term special education, “they think of students who have significant cognitive impairments that will preclude them from ever fully contributing to society.”

“The reality is that of the approximately 163,000 students in Massachusetts who qualify for special education services, 92 percent are not cognitively impaired. That means that the performance of cognitively disabled and non-disabled should be similar,” she said.

The audience was then presented with state Department of Education data showing that non-IEP students significantly outperformed those who have IEPs on the MCAS test.

In 2007, 74.1 percent of regular education students scored proficient or advanced on the English Language Arts MCAS, whereas 27 percent of students with special needs were successful, according to data collected by SpedWatch.

“This is disparate treatment, which is really a civil rights issue. Women did it and they won the right to vote. African Americans did it, and they ended

segregation. The only people who are going to help us is us,” Ms. Chambers said.

Emotions were high as parents expressed frustration with a number of Massachusetts and Rhode Island school districts.

“My little angel is with me tonight. She is blind. She can't walk. She is missing part of her brain stem and has a shunt. My daughter has cerebral palsy and scoliosis. When we went to the classroom there was no way to wash your hands; no sanitizer. If something gets through the shunt, it could kill her,” said Laurie Schiller, mother of 3-year-old Paige.

Ms. Schiller, who is from New Bedford, indicated she will not send her daughter to school until a different placement is offered. The Standard-Times contacted the New Bedford Public Schools on Wednesday for comment, but did not receive a return phone call.

An adoptive mother of five children with special needs, Kathy Pettey of Westport, has children in a number of settings in and outside of the district. “It has been a nightmare. A constant struggle. The excuse is always no money, no money, no money,” she said.

Richard Botelho, a candidate for the Westport School Committee, commented on the funding issue. “You're getting a lot of baloney from the state and federal levels. Whenever I see that, I say follow the money — 40 percent from federal and 60 percent from state. You're not getting that money. We have to get them to do exactly the law they passed,” said Mr. Botelho.

The SpedWatch presentation was hosted by the Westport Parent Advisory Committee. A room at White's of Westport was donated by Lafrance Hospitality.

### Correction

Because of a reporting error, there was a mistake in a quote by Ellen Chambers in a SpedWatch story March 25. The quote should read, “That means that the performance of students with and without disabilities ought to be substantially similar.”