

Parents advised to be advocates

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SPRINGFIELD - Ellen M. Chambers, the executive director of SPEDWatch Inc., a statewide nonprofit group, met with about 20 parents in Springfield yesterday, and said many school districts don't fully comply with laws governing special education services.

"Students in Springfield are in really grave danger of not receiving the education to which they are entitled," she told a group at the Central Library.

Mary Anne Morris, executive officer of special education for the Springfield public schools, could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Chambers, who led a demonstration outside the state Department of Education in Malden on Jan. 17, urged parents to ensure the civil rights of disabled children are upheld. "We have to organize, and speak with one voice ... if we're waiting for someone to come along and save us, no one is coming," Chambers said.

Less than 10 percent of Massachusetts children with disabilities have major cognitive impairments that would prevent them from mastering grade-level work with proper services, Chambers said. However, only 27 percent of students who have an individual education plan tested advanced or proficient in English on state standardized tests last year, compared to 74 percent of ordinary children. Math scores showed a similarly wide gap.

"Parents of these (special education) students are overwhelmed with frustration. They try to advocate for their children, but encounter roadblocks at every turn ... they are easily outmaneuvered by school administrators who are focused on cost control," Chambers said. She said school districts including Springfield fail to adequately and promptly evaluate children, and to develop and implement special education plans.

Chambers, of Pepperell, has a 16-year-old daughter with high-functioning autism. The teenager was formerly diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder because of mishandling by the public school system, Chambers said, which now pays her tuition at a specialized private school.

Parents said they struggle to get adequate special education services from public schools, and encounter major hurdles in trying to maintain a child's existing placement when moving from one town to another.

"The message that Ellen (Chambers) brings today is an important one," said Carla J. Doyle, president of the SPED Parents Advisory Council in Holyoke. Doyle recently returned to Holyoke after living for a while in Belchertown. Her son Gavin McGillicuddy, 17, who has autism, was going to remain at Belchertown High School, but Holyoke officials did not submit paper work in time, Doyle said, and Gavin wasn't enrolled anywhere in September and October.

Catherine M. Martin, of Chicopee, said she drives her 13-year-old son daily to a specialized private school in Lexington, where he was placed when the family lived in Newton. Martin, whose son was in a hospital yesterday with a gastrointestinal disorder, said she spent \$30,000 in legal fees in recent years related to his education. The Chicopee Public Schools ultimately agreed to fund his tuition this year, Martin said, but questions remain about where he will attend next fall.

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