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New survey shows CPS special ed problems continue despite ISBE probe

Parents, teachers say CPS hasn't fixed problems, independent monitoring team needed to oversee program and protect students

CHICAGO—Despite claims that Chicago Public Schools (CPS) has fixed the special ed problems at issue in a state probe, the vast majority of parents and teachers responding to a new survey say they continue to experience the same delays, denials and roadblocks in obtaining services for students that prompted the state investigation in the first place.

Legal advocates and parent groups will present the survey findings to the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Wednesday to bolster their call for an independent monitor to oversee the CPS special ed program and for at minimum a \$10 million dedicated fund to compensate students whose legally-required services were denied or delayed.

"Actions speak louder than words and survey data from thousands of parents and teachers confirm the problems that prompted our request for the ISBE investigation are continuing," Matt Cohen, one of the lawyers representing the advocate groups that brought the state complaint, said. "We are talking about our most vulnerable students here and the only way to assure they are protected is with a robust and fully-staffed independent monitor who has the authority to compel CPS to follow the law."

More than 2,200 parents, teachers and administrators responded to the survey, issued by the legal advocates and parent groups who sought the ISBE probe in the wake of massive complaints by special ed parents and teachers last year.

In one of the most shocking findings, 71 percent of all respondents said that legally-required student services were denied because the school couldn't afford to hire the necessary staff, in clear violation of federal special ed law.

And 45 percent of all respondents reported students being denied their required aide because the school had insufficient student data or a district representative failed to attend the meeting to finalize the student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), also a violation of federal law. IEPs are the federally-mandated roadmap for the education of students with disabilities.

The survey also found that CPS's much-heralded revised procedure manual isn't making the grade. CPS says it revised the manual to address the concerns of teachers and legal advocates who challenged the procedures put in place by ousted CEO Forrest Claypool last year.

Yet the survey found:

- 95 percent of teachers and 91 percent of administrators said they have yet to receive a training on the revised manual. Without proper training, teachers and administrators continue to have problems approving services for special ed students in the complicated, online system CPS uses to establish IEPs.
- 46 percent of parents said that their child was not consistently receiving the services indicated on their IEP this school year and another 22 percent were unsure of whether services were being provided.
- Some 69 percent of parents said they had never even seen the procedure manual, which is critical to obtaining needed services, like one-on-one aides or transportation, for their children.
- 71 percent of parents have never heard of the new CPS Special Ed Parent Advisory Committee, which CPS CEO Janice Jackson claims will enable parents to have a greater say in developing and administering special ed policy in the district.

"After years of having issues getting proper services for my son, he was wrongfully denied transportation services last year," CPS parent Nancy Curran, who submitted a sworn affidavit in the ISBE probe, said. "I participated in this inquiry with the goal of sharing our experience so that systems and structures are put in place to improve special ed service delivery for all students. I believe the only way to achieve this is through an independent monitor with staff who can hold CPS accountable."

"This survey conducted over only two weeks time magnifies the depth of the violations of children's rights and the extent to which CPS fails to engage stakeholders," Legal Council for Health Justice managing attorney Amy Zimmerman added. "Over 1,400 anonymous comments bolster the need for whistleblower protections along with accountability."

The legal advocates are delivering the full survey results along with a detailed proposal for remedies to ISBE board members Wednesday. The state board is scheduled to rule on the group's request at its May 16 meeting in Springfield.

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The special education advocates' coalition includes: Access Living; Chicago Principals and Administrators Association; the Chicago Teachers Union; Equip For Equality; LAF (Legal Assistance Foundation); Legal Council for Health Justice; Matt Cohen and Associates; Ounce of Prevention Fund; Parents 4 Teachers; Potter and Bolanos, LLC; Raise Your Hand for Illinois Public Education; Shriver National Center on Poverty Law; 19th Ward Parents for Special Education, and Sharon Weitzman Soltman.