



**Letter seeks to ease parents' ire
Emblidge notes concerns expressed by parents of special-needs students**

Thursday, Jul 31, 2008 - 12:08 AM Updated: 12:42 AM

By OLYMPIA MEOLA
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Special-education advocates are taking comfort in Virginia Board of Education members' remarks about proposed changes to the state's special-education regulations.

Parents of special-needs public school children have been fiercely critical of some proposed changes, including one that could limit their input and another that would transfer the administration of the "due-process" system to the Department of Education from the Virginia Supreme Court.

State lawmakers are now among the concerned. Speaker of the House of Delegates William J. Howell, R-Stafford, called the due-process change a "conflict of interest," and gubernatorial hopeful Del. Brian J. Moran, D-Alexandria, wrote the education department about curtailing parental involvement.

The letters followed Gov. Timothy M. Kaine's early objections to changes that would limit the level of input parents would have in their child's education.

Board of Education President Mark E. Emblidge responded on July 18 to Howell and Kaine, and his letter, circulating among the state's special-education and disability community, has assured many of the 2,240 people who have filed nearly 20,700 comments on the proposed changes with the Department of Education.

Emblidge writes that the board recognizes that the most significant concerns relate to elimination of parental consent for ending special-education services when a student is determined to no longer need them, and to changing management of the due-process system.

"I want to assure you that Board members have heard your concerns and those of parents throughout the Commonwealth and that the retention of current requirements regarding the two areas cited above will be of the highest priority in the final determination process," he writes to Kaine.

The board will see a final draft of the proposed regulation changes on Sept. 25 but is not scheduled to vote at that time.

Parents such as Rob and Susan Foster, who attended a public hearing in Chesterfield County on the proposed changes with their 9-year-old twin daughters, are comforted by Emblidge's remarks.

"I think it's very good, but I think they are carefully crafted," Susan Foster said. "I think so many parents came out to speak and really made the board aware. I think Mark Emblidge did a good job, and I think the board heard us."

The comfort doesn't extend quite far enough for others, though. Emily Dreyfus, an attorney for the child-advocacy group JustChildren, wants other concerns addressed.

"The biggest one obviously was the change in parental consent, so I am very encouraged that the board is voicing concerns about that and seems willing to reinstate that right in the final regs, but I do think there are other concerns that parents and students have . . . that are also very important to students with disabilities."

Contact Olympia Meola at (804) 649-6812 or omeola@timesdispatch.com.

<http://www.inrich.com/cva/ric/news.apx.-content-articles-RTD-2008-07-31-0133.html>