



Parents, advocates oppose special education changes

At a public hearing, they say proposals for state regulations will harm students.

By [CATHY GRIMES](#) | 247-4758

May 29, 2008

NORFOLK - The speakers changed every three minutes, but with few exceptions their message Wednesday night was the same: The proposed changes to the state special education regulations are flawed and harmful.

Department of Education staff and Board of Education Vice President Ella Ward listened as more than 60 people offered comments during the department's public hearing at [Norfolk's](#) Norview High School. The event drew more than 150 people, including disabled students such as Joshua Parker of Norfolk, who haltingly and respectfully voiced his concerns about losing his individual education program and services guaranteed by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

The public hearing was one of nine being held across the state as the education department revises the state's regulations to bring them in line with the federal law. But while parents and advocacy organizations have agreed changes are necessary, they oppose proposals to reduce parent's roles in determining when services should be stopped, to reduce the number of progress reports, to shorten the developmental delay age span from 2-8 to 2-5 years, and to move the hearings process from the state courts to the department of education. Several speakers also objected to a proposal allowing school district personnel to have voting rights on special education advisory committees.

"Many of the new changes would be hazardous to the academic well being of special education students, said Beth Haw, a member of the [Williamsburg James City County](#) special education advisory committee.

[Chesapeake](#) parent Dynnette Taylor asked why the department wanted to go backward by removing short-term goals from students' education plans and eliminating the need for parental consent to remove services if a school decides the child no longer needs them. Many speakers said eliminating parent involvement would lead to more lawsuits and hearings.

"How is the lawsuit option less costly to schools?" asked [Newport News](#) resident Carl Brakman.

Harron and Sonya Huie, of Suffolk, took turns speaking, their voices choked with tears as they shared stories of their daughter's progress in Suffolk schools. They worried about a change that would hold schools harmless if a child does not meet the education plan goals and they, like most of the other speakers, worried about shutting parents out.

Norfolk Public Schools Board member Stephen Tonelson spoke for his district's board, saying the changes "will cause a significant reduction in rights to students and families," and could reduce the state's standing as a champion of education and children.

The state will hold three more public hearings in Vienna, [Charlottesville](#) and Tappahanock and is accepting public comments until June 30.

For more information about the proposed changes and how to submit comments, visit <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/duproc/regulationsCWD.html>.