



Proposed special-education changes spark parent protests

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Powhatan County mother Cas Schirra pleaded with Virginia Board of Education members Tuesday night, urging them not to make changes to the state's special-education regulations that will decrease parental involvement.

The hearing at Clover Hill High School in Chesterfield County was one of nine being held to solicit input on the proposed changes.

Schirra fought for 12 years for her daughter to receive special-education services. The girl, now 18, was granted those services last month.

"We, as parents, desperately need to be involved at every single level," Schirra said. "And to take that away from us, to take our voice that is so small and so difficult for the schools to hear, would be reprehensible."

Two Board of Education members, several Department of Education officials and roughly 150 parents, school officials, special-education teachers and advocates listened for hours to brief, emotional speeches that touched on many of the proposed regulation changes.

Mothers spoke through tears, fathers told personal stories, many shared private hopes for their children's futures. They constituted the largest turnout so far to any of the board's comment sessions across the state.

A concern shared among most of the parents who spoke hinged on changes to parental involvement, including a proposal to allow school officials to determine that a student no longer has a disability and discontinue special-education services without parental consent.

The Board of Education is revising the state standards to comply with federal law. The proposals -- ranging from changing discipline procedures to redefining disabilities -- are aimed at streamlining the extensive special-education policies and aligning them with federal regulations, education officials say.

The Virginia Council of Administrators of Special Education, a nonprofit professional organization, has urged adoption of the new regulations. And one speaker who supports

the suggested changes said last night that Virginia has exceeded federal requirements for special-education services for years and some changes to state rules would bring them in line with federal ones.

"Is there anything wrong with the rights parents get under the federal requirements?" asked Kathleen Mehfoud, an attorney who has represented school boards and handled special-education issues for 30 years.

Judging by the cool response to her comments, the crowd's answer was yes.

The Department of Education already has received thousands of comments about the proposed changes, including a letter from Gov. Timothy M. Kaine who wrote to the Board of Education that "I do not currently see any circumstances under which I would approve a final regulation reducing parental involvement in these ways."

The Virginia Office for Protection and Advocacy, a state agency that addresses disability-related problems, also filed comments critical of the proposed regulations, writing that "the proposals will seriously undermine Virginia's commitment to full acceptance and integration for people with disabilities."

Several speakers last night heralded Kaine's remarks and railed against the proposed changes.

Bradley Purcell, father of a 15-year-old son with severe dyslexia, took issue with the changes to parental consent as well as a proposal to make the Department of Education responsible for training hearing officers who preside over due-process hearings. Currently, the state Supreme Court trains officers who oversee the hearings, which can be costly resolutions to disputes between parents and a school system over special-education services.

"The Department of Education is in close alignment with local education systems for a number of obvious reasons," said Purcell, an attorney from Richmond. "The DOE shares the job of implementing the state's educational policy and has many budgetary and staffing linkages with school districts."

Board of Education members will complete all public-comment sessions and will likely tweak the draft document before taking action, according to Charles Pyle, Department of Education spokesman. They aim to take final action this fall.

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