

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Proposal Limits Progress Reports

By [Ian Shapira](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

Friday, May 9, 2008; Page B05

At two hearings within the next four weeks, Northern Virginians will have a chance to weigh in on a state plan to revise special education rules that has already drawn thousands of written comments and raised concerns among many parents of children with disabilities.

The most controversial proposal would give schools more leeway to suspend certain special services for students, such as speech or occupational health therapy. The targeted services would remain in place if parents object, pending a resolution of the dispute with the school system.

But other proposals are also drawing close scrutiny. One would reduce the number of regular progress reports families receive on a student's "individualized education plan," or IEP, a roadmap of objectives and goals. Another would allow school systems to refuse a parent's request for more than one IEP meeting a year with school officials, and a third would expand the criteria used to define student disabilities. Parents say the latter measure could make it harder for children to qualify for special services.

[Charles Pyle](#), a spokesman for the [Virginia Department of Education](#), said the revisions would align state regulations with the federal government's, improve efficiency and ensure that the right services go to the most qualified students. But Pyle also stressed that the recommendations are not final and that the state welcomes criticisms and suggestions. So far, the state has received more than 3,000 comments.

"We've exceeded the federal regulations in the past," he said. "It's understandable" that parents have concerns, Pyle added. "We would expect to hear about this."

[Gov. Timothy M. Kaine \(D\)](#) has said in a statement that he opposes many of the proposed revisions. The state Board of Education, whose nine members are appointed by the governor and confirmed by the General Assembly, could vote on the rules by December.

The state is holding several public hearings on the proposal, including one at 6:30 p.m. Thursday at Freedom High School in [Loudoun County](#), and at 6:30 p.m. June 2 at [Oakton High School](#) in [Fairfax County](#).

The proposals would affect many families. About 14 percent of Virginia students in public schools have disabilities, according to a state report last year. Some parents say the proposals would drastically alter the state's historically progressive stance toward special education.

Sheree Brown-Kaplan, vice chairman of the Fairfax County Council of Parent Teacher Associations' special education committee, said she worries that parents would be helpless if school systems are allowed to reject a request for additional IEP meetings during the school year.

"If you don't have the team IEP meeting, you're basically talking to one teacher only," said Brown-Kaplan, who has two children with communication disorders. That teacher, she said, is likely to be focused on the curriculum. "But maybe the child's problems have something do with other subject matters, and the problem's there. You need everybody there. It's called consensus. You have to make these decisions together."

Parents also worry about new state criteria for disabilities, Brown-Kaplan said. She said some children could be disqualified from help they need, citing students with Asperger's Syndrome as an example. "These kids are often bright and are able to function in general education classrooms," Brown-Kaplan said. "But the school could say, 'He doesn't fit the [disability] category and doesn't get any services.' "