

Bridgeport schools under scrutiny for special ed translation services

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BRIDGEPORT — A school district under constant scrutiny for its failure to comply with special education laws is facing a new concern over translation services it provides to students and parents during special education planning meetings.

The Center for Children's Advocacy, along with Disabilities Rights Advocates, a national organization — working on behalf of Make the Road Connecticut — maintains that the district routinely fails to provide qualified, impartial interpreters and translated documents to children with disabilities and their parents who are not English speakers.

Under state and federal law, they must.

The district has reportedly been working on the issue, but barriers remain, according a letter sent by the agencies to schools Superintendent Aresta Johnson in July.

John Di Donato, chief of specialized instruction, told a school board committee this week the matter was serious and needs to be addressed.

"In their judgment, the district hasn't moved quickly enough or substantially enough," said Di Donato, who has been working with attorneys from the groups on a structured settlement agreement to head off litigation.

"Quite frankly ...it probably isn't an issue isolated to Bridgeport," Di Donato said, suggesting the national groups may be using Bridgeport as a test case.

"Language access is a problem throughout the state, particularly in some districts," said Sabrina Tavi, a staff attorney for the Center for Children's Advocacy.

She described Bridgeport's issues as systemic, but refused to go into specifics, calling the ongoing discussions with the district confidential.

Barbara Lopez, director of Make the Road Connecticut, said the organization has been working to improve language access for children and parents for some time and that understanding is critical for student achievement and parent engagement.

"It is an ongoing issue," Lopez said. "At this time, we are actively engaged in negotiations with Bridgeport and are optimistic that these cooperative discussions will improve language access to the special education process in Bridgeport public schools."

Twice in recent years, the Center for Children's Advocacy has filed complaints with the state over the district's identification and handling of special education students. The last formal complaint was resolved last year.

Di Donato, said he has been working to develop district capacity to deliver special education services to the point it can defend its position when complaints arise.

As for the current complaint, he said the district has instituted translation services when Planning and Placement (PPT) meetings are held, but characterized them as uneven. PPT meetings are required to determine appropriate services for students with disabilities.

It is unclear how many PPTs are conducted by the district or how many involve students and parents who do not speak English.

In the last school year, the district had 3,782 students with disabilities. It also has more than 3,000 English Language Learners. Spanish and Portuguese are the top two non-English languages spoken in the district but they are among 73 languages represented in the district.

One of the biggest issues, Di Donato suggested, is who is used as an interpreter. A social worker on the planning team who translates might self censor. A secretary called in to translate may not understand the academic language used.



About 20 parents and children staged a protest outside of City Hall in Bridgeport Connecticut, on August 23, 2018 demanding better services for Latino students in the school district. Photo: John Burgeson

"I have been at PPTs where that has occurred," Di Donato said.

The district decided last spring to hire two interpretation firms. District officials would not say this week how much the services are being paid and did not respond to a request for their contracts.

Long term, Di Donato said, he would prefer to train district staff to provide accurate and ethical interpretations rather than hire outside firms. Some training is already occurring.

"This is going to be a costly program, Di Donato said. "Every time we spend our resources on mandated services, it means some non-mandated service is going to be reduced."

Since March, the district says, it has developed district-wide interpretation and translation procedural guidelines. It has posters in all schools offering language help in 14 languages, added a translation service to its website and asks parents their language preference for communications. It also sends out phone messages for things like school closings in Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian-Creole and Vietnamese.

"We have taken affirmative leaps. That is my position," Ben Walker, a board member and chair of the Teaching and Learning Committee, said.

While acknowledged some agreement should be worked out, Walker said he fears entering into a legally binding document dictated by a non-governmental agency.

"I don't want to do 150 PPTs with Linguista (one of the outside translation agencies) and miss one and find a suit in our lap," Walker said. "It needs to be reasonable."

The committee was promised a progress report on the talks when it meets in October.