

READING

The Boston Globe

Is town cheating special ed kids? Father's suit says cost cuts come first

By Matt Gunderson, Globe Correspondent | June 29, 2006

When Reading schoolteachers told Scott Davarich last November that the performance of his third-grade daughter Allison, who has dyslexia, was dipping, Davarich said he trusted that school officials knew how to handle the problem.

But when officials moved Allison to a different school building and cut her special education services in half, Davarich said, he became frustrated. He is now claiming the maneuver was a tactic by the district to cut costs.

In late May, he sued the district over its unwillingness to fund a proposal to move his daughter out of Reading's schools. "It was strictly a money issue," he said of the district's actions.

Davarich is one of about a half-dozen Reading parents rankled by what he characterizes as an ailing and corrupt special education system in the town of 23,000. The parents, said Davarich, are now gearing up to take action on the controversy that has simmered for years, mostly behind closed doors.

Superintendent Patrick Schettini said he would not discuss specifics of the Davarich complaint due to confidentiality reasons, but he denied Davarich's general accusation that the district is cutting special education services to trim educational costs.

"We do not make those decisions in order to save money," he said.

"We do those things in the best interests of the students."

At the moment, SpEdWatch Inc., a Pepperell-based group that uses publicity to shed light on districts' special education practices, is considering whether to champion the families' causes. The first meeting between parents and the organization is tentatively scheduled for sometime in July.

In addition to suing the district for private school tuition for his daughter, Davarich, the only Reading parent thus far to speak publicly about his concerns, has also lodged a complaint with the state Department of Education.

The complaint alleges that the district violated state special education laws by not notifying him of changes to his daughter's educational plan and by reducing services to her.

Reading school officials had until June 23 to make their official reply to the complaint, said Davarich.

Schettini declined to discuss the reply, and spokesmen for the Department of Education did not respond to requests for comment.

If upheld, the lawsuit and the complaint could serve as a springboard for SpEdWatch's efforts to investigate Reading's public school system in the coming months, said Ellen Chambers, founder of the group. But her organization would be probing the situation in Reading anyway, based on complaints from other parents, she said.

The organization, which sees itself as a statewide watchdog, is also embarking on an investigation of Tewksbury public schools, also high on Chambers's list of districts with questionable special education practices.

"We would be investigating Reading regardless of whether the complaint was part of the mixture," she said.

While Schettini said the district's special education policies are not driven by financial considerations, he said officials occasionally make a budgetary decision in regard to special education that draws opposition from parents.

"Sometimes there will be a disagreement," he said. "Sometimes we have a way of doing things that doesn't cost as much."

Reading's special education costs have skyrocketed in the past few years, said Schettini.

The state does provide funding, known as circuit breaker funds as well as Chapter 70 school aid, to offset some of the

costs, but the spiraling cost of both special and regular education is not unusual , he said.

``That's not just a phenomenon for Reading," he said.

Davarich said he hopes the litigation and publicity will set a precedent for Reading schools and help those families without enough money to combat other lapses in special education.

He expects to spend almost \$40,000 to wage his campaign against the district, a figure that includes both private school tuition for his daughter and an estimated \$10,000 in attorney fees for litigation, he said.

``I don't want to see other families in town have to go through this," he said. ■

© [Copyright](#) 2006 The New York Times Company