

Special needs kids deserve better

By Beverly Beckham

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Hundreds of people were packed into a small room at the Department of Education in Malden Monday, more standing than sitting; more sitting on the floor than in chairs.

Never mind that the room was too small to accommodate even half of them. Never mind that the meeting began in the middle of the afternoon. Or that Malden is not centrally located. Or that there were no translators to sign for the hearing impaired.

People left work early. They took the day off. They got babysitters. Some brought their kids. Some brought pictures of their kids.

Mothers, fathers, lawyers, legislators, social workers and children's advocates all came to tell the state's Department of Education the same thing: Leave the special education regulations alone.

The department has been fiddling with them - adding words, deleting others, rewriting what legislators spent years getting right. The 48-page revision looks as if it has been edited with a hatchet.

And because DOE must share its changes with the public before voting to make them permanent on April 26, the board set two hearings, Monday's in Malden and one last week in Springfield.

Springfield and Malden to get input about changes that will affect some 160,000 special needs kids throughout the state, that would catapult them back to the '50s.

Does ``under the radar'' leap to mind?

What DOE is proposing would devalue the input of parents when it comes to educational choices (by giving more authority to school administrators who often have little contact with children). Far worse is that DOE, after years of inclusion, is proposing to locate special ed programs in separate settings if administrators can show an ``overriding educational purpose.''

Isn't that segregation?

That's not what we mean, DOE representatives said.

But it's there in black and white on Page 8: ``separately-sited special education classrooms.''

And it's underlined.

There's a line: I can't hear what you're saying because what you are speaks so loud.

What the Board of Education is is arrogant. It's railroading these changes and only going through the motion of listening to objections. It has nine members and 15 on its Special Education Advisory Council,

but only three people - two by the end of the hearings because one actually left in the middle - were sent to listen to parents and children's advocates.

``Why are we changing it - the law?'' parents asked. ``Tell me one area where this helps the children.''

They didn't get an answer.

What they got was, ``Your feelings are important to us. We do take seriously the public comment.''' Years ago, they might have been fine with this. Not any more. They're smarter, now, and better prepared to fight for their kids.

The DOE is scheduling a third hearing.

``When we let our guard down awful, horrendous things happen to our children,''' one parent said.

Which is why they won't let their guard down ever again.

(Talk back to Beverly Beckham at be Beckham@aol.com.)