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Special Education To Boost Services

D.C. Officials Seek To Comply With 2006 Court Order

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[D.C. Mayor Adrian M. Fenty](#)

and school officials are proposing sweeping changes in the beleaguered special education program in an attempt to bring the city into compliance with a consent decree that requires it to care for hundreds of disabled students waiting to receive services.

In reaching the agreement, announced yesterday, city and school officials seek to meet requirements of a 2006 court order to eliminate a backlog of more than 1,000 decisions from hearing officers regarding placement of students in special education programs. The decree settled a class-action lawsuit filed by parents protesting the system's long delay in following through with services for the students.

Under the agreement that stemmed from the case, *Blackman v. District of Columbia*, the city would introduce more than \$6 million worth of programs, including additional mental health services, more nationally recognized models for helping students with disabilities in the classroom and more support for parents. School officials presented the proposal to U.S. District Judge Paul L. Friedman on Tuesday.

"This agreement is a reflection of the vision of this administration . . . to improve and fix special education," said [Peter Nickles](#), general counsel and senior adviser to Fenty (D). "For too long, the District has spent too much money with no results for special education kids."

Special education has been a major problem for the District. Because the school system has failed to provide adequate services, parents of special needs students increasingly have sought help from administrative hearing officers who often order the system to place the students in expensive private schools.

The school system spends more than \$100 million annually on tuition for more than 2,000 special education students to attend private schools and more than \$60 million to transport hundreds of students to school.

The system has repeatedly missed deadlines to comply with the consent decree, said Ira A. Burnim, a lawyer representing the plaintiffs. Nevertheless, he said, he is cautiously optimistic about the agreement.

"I think it's a very thoughtful approach," Burnim said.

But, he added, "There still remains a high degree of skepticism on whether these good intentions will actually come to fruition."

The agreement requires the school system by early next year to devise a way to reduce the backlog of students waiting to receive services and to hire 10 more people to get the job done.

It also calls for the system to:

Â¿ Develop a program to speed the implementation of special education students' individual education plans.

Â¿ Establish pilot schools featuring programs recognized for boosting the students' achievement.

Â¿ Try to reduce the number of students in private schools.

"This agreement supports a pivotal change in how we serve children with special needs and their families in the District of Columbia," State Education Superintendent [Deborah A. Gist](#) said yesterday in a statement.

"Through a series of carefully crafted initiatives, we will make significant progress in 2008," she added.

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