

D.C. to Give Special Education Program New Data System, More Staff

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An attempt to upgrade the District's troubled special education program will give it a new computer system and additional case management workers, State Superintendent of Education Deborah A. Gist announced today.

Gist said the city is spending \$4.3 million for a computer system that will allow schools to keep track of nearly every aspect of a special education student's academic life, cutting down on delays stemming from operating several unlinked systems that have inaccurate data. She also said the city plans to hire 30 additional case managers so students referred to special education can receive services much more quickly.

The initiatives are "a way in which we intend to serve students more effectively," Gist said. She was joined by Mayor Adrian M. Fenty (D) at the news conference in the lobby of her office in Judiciary Square.

For years, city and school system officials have criticized the special education department for lacking high-quality programs for 9,400 learning-disabled and physically disabled students. The school system spends about \$137 million on private school tuition annually for about 2,400 children it cannot serve in the public schools.

The initiatives stem from an agreement school system officials reached in December with plaintiffs in a class-action case. The suit, *Blackman v. District of Columbia*, was filed by parents protesting the system's long delay in providing special education services for their children. It resulted in a consent decree and a federal court order for the system to eliminate a backlog of more than 1,000 decisions from hearing officers regarding the placement of students in special education.

Gist said her office is spending \$4.3 million for a special education data system to track disabled students in the school system as well as 2,000 in charter schools. The online program will track data on the students' referral into special education; their transfer from school to school; their individual education plans; and disciplinary action.

Moreover, Gist and other officials said, the system will allow school officials to better capture data needed so the city can get reimbursement from Medicaid for special education health-related services it provides to low-income students. Officials said the school system loses millions of dollars a year from failure to seek the reimbursements.

The school system repeatedly has been cited by the U.S. Department of Education for submitting reports with inaccurate or incomplete data.

Gist said the initiative involves cleaning up data already in the system and training users to avoid adding errors to it. "We want to make sure front-line users understand the need for clarity and functionality of the system," she said.

Tamera Lewis, project director for special education reform, said in an interview that hiring the 30 case management workers means that students will receive special education services much sooner. She said she would expect students to get help within 30 days of having their education plans approved. Currently, in some extreme cases, she said, it can take more than a year.

"These are two important steps but are by no means a comprehensive program," Ira A. Burnim, a lawyer representing the plaintiffs in the Blackman case, said in an interview.