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Parents reject state special-ed proposal

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AUGUSTA — Parents of children with disabilities and service providers from across the state urged legislators Tuesday to reject a state proposal to put the responsibility of serving disabled children in the hands of Maine public schools by 2009.

The current structure of serving children with special needs from birth to age 5 at 16 statewide Child Development Services centers would be eliminated under a bill being pushed by the state Department of Education.

The department proposes to consolidate Child Development Services and centralize administrative functions, with the department having responsibility to provide services to children with disabilities during the transition period, from 2006 to 2009.

Then, starting in 2009, local schools would have the responsibility of providing services to children who have disabilities between birth and age 5.

Education Commissioner Susan Gendron said the proposal would save $7 million a year and still provide quality services to the kids who need them.

She said "the money would follow the child," meaning schools taking on the responsibility for providing services would be reimbursed, the same year, for that cost. She suggested the current system has flaws and may not meet federal standards unless changes are made.

"In no way are we designing a program that will remove services for any children in Child Development Services," Gendron said Tuesday. "We tried to look long and hard to create something that is sustainable, long term, in a model that will ensure a seamless system of services for our children."

However, many of the approximately 150 people at an Education Committee public hearing Tuesday said the current Child Development Services system has helped many children and should not be changed.

Others worried the state's public schools don't have the time, money or space to take on the added responsibility of providing services to children who have not yet reached school age.

And several parents credited the current system for allowing their special-needs children to get ready to attend school and succeed.

Lynda Mazzola — a speech-language pathologist with a private practice in Winthrop, former special education director for Hall-Dale schools and grandparent of a 3-year-old with special needs — said teachers are not trained to provide services to very young children with special needs, nor do they have the connections with other service providers that Child Development Services staff have.

Mazzola said there were some positives in the proposed change and suggested a compromise between what is proposed and what exists currently.

"Instead of trying to create a new wheel, let's take the one we have and make it better," Mazzola said.

The bill is L.D. 1772.

Tuesday's hearing was moved to the Augusta Civic Center to accommodate the large turnout of participants.

Several people spoke in favor of an alternative bill, L.D. 1790. However, Education Committee co-chairwoman Sen. Elizabeth Mitchell, D-Vassalboro, noted that bill is just a "concept bill" currently without any text proposed to become law.

Mitchell urged speakers to give suggestions on what to do, rather than simply criticize the proposal.

She assured the many parents in attendance the state does not want to eliminate services for children with special needs.

"There is not a person in this room who wants to take these services away," she said.

An Education Committee work session on the bills is set for Feb. 9 at 2:30 p.m.

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