

# Parents: Special needs children need better testing, resources

By Antonio M. Prado  
Staff Reporter

The state needs to come up with a fairer way of testing special needs students.

State legislators and officials from the Delaware Department of Education listened to these concerns and others at a forum held by the Brandywine Special Needs Parent Teacher Association February 10 at the Brandywine Town Center.

Other issues discussed included school accountability and whether special education student's scores should be held against them, special education funding and the preparation of all children, including those in special education, for success in life after public school.

The association is composed primarily of

Brandywine parents but the group welcomes input from Red Clay and Christiana parents.

The Community News also learned that Red Clay parents are considering starting its own group.

Moderator Alex Rittberg, co-president of the Special Needs PTA, asked panelists whether the Delaware Student Testing Program (DSTP) is right for children with special needs. Rittberg, who has two children at Maple Lane Elementary School also asked if special needs children should be tested with the DSTP.

In Brandywine, more than 45 percent of third-graders met or exceeded the reading standard compared to more than 60 percent for the state, according to the 2005 DSTP scores. More than 20 percent of Brandywine fifth-graders met or exceeded the standard compared to more than 50 percent for the state, 25 percent of Brandywine eighth-graders met or exceeded the standard compared to more than 30 percent for the state's eighth-graders and the numbers were both at just less than 20 percent for 10th-graders in both categories.

Department of Education official Martha Toomey said it is important to test all children. Toomey is director of exceptional children and early childhood education curriculum & instructional improvement.

"I think we've had results because of the high expectations (for children)," she said. "We need to make sure that kids with disabilities have the same opportunities as any child."

Audience member Joan Kelley, who has an autistic child, said it is hard to understand how the DSTP works.

"I feel pretty stupid when it comes to the test," Kelley said. "I'm so frustrated and I'm thinking about exercising my right to have my child not take the test."

Brian Touchette, an education associate in Toomey's department, said all students must take the DSTP. And Toomey said there are several accommodations that can be made for special needs children taking the test.

But Michael Bank, president of the Red Clay Education Association, said that the federal No Child Left Behind Act's intent to treat all children equally does not mean they are treated fairly. Bank, a counselor at Richardson Park Intensive Learning Center, said he has seen special needs children struggle and become frustrated while taking the DSTP. He said the test amounts to a week of lost instruction.

The Red Clay Consolidated School District has sued the Department of Education over its decision to include the DSTP results of 35 special education students in Warner Elementary School's scores although those students actually attended Richardson Park Intensive Learning Center. Under No Child Left Behind sanctions, the school faces a state takeover and the replacement of staff, among others.

In response, House Majority Leader Wayne Smith (R-Clair Manor) and Sen. Margaret Rose Hendry (D-Wilmington East) have introduced House Bill 349, which would in part eliminate holding a school accountable for students it does not instruct.

Nancy A. Doorey, a Brandywine Board of Education member, said a good alternative for testing special education students may be the

Northwest Education Association's standardized test, known as the NWEA.

"It is absolutely essential to have high expectations for all kids," Doorey said. "But then you come to the state test. Is it the right test? No. However, you need to know it (NWEA) is not yet aligned with Delaware standards. It takes about two years to go through that cycle."

State Sen. Charles L. Copeland (R-West Farms), whose district includes parts of Brandywine and Red Clay, said he's heard several people complain of the DSTP's ability to accurately measure student's progress. So, he believes the state should reconsider the way it tests special education students.

"I have yet to here anyone say the NWEA has serious problems," Copeland said.

State Rep. Gregory F. Lavelle (R-Sharples), said the DSTP results are not good. Lavelle has a child with special needs.

"I do think that the range of children is challenging," Lavelle said. "They should be tested, but we should not be going blind into it."

Steve Yeatman, 34, of Brandywine Hundred, asked the audience of about 60 to raise their hands if they felt that they had paid for services for their child that should have been provided by the school district. At least half the audience raised their hand.

However, State Sen. Catherine L. Cloutier (R-Heatherbrooke) said one-third of the state's \$1 billion budget goes to schools.

Afterward, Yeatman said he felt the forum was helpful. He also appreciates how the Brandywine School District is having an independent consultant, Stetson Associates, analyze its services to special education students. Yeatman's son has Asperger's syndrome.

"It'll be interesting to see what they come up with," Yeatman said. "I think that it's great that we had this many people from the state. You had the Department of Education, school board members, representatives and senators, who are all now aware that this is an issue."

Tom Pidgeon, 32, of Brandywine Hundred, urged state officials to give teachers more resources. Pidgeon is a teacher in the Colonial District's George Reed Middle School, and he said he has a problem with people who aren't in classrooms telling teachers how to education children.

"Come into the schools and see that I've got 30 kids sitting in front of me," he said. "They want to close the achievement gap and they want to raise the DSTP scores when one person can't devote the attention that 30 students need."

"They want to put money into audits and task forces and people to do all these studies about what's going on in our district," he said. "Let's get back to basics and do a simple student-to-teacher ratio."

Tom and Kristin Pidgeon, are concerned because one of their children, a 3-year-old with Down syndrome, attends Bush Early Education Center.

"I grew up in this district," Kristin Pidgeon said. "Honestly, I am shocked. This was the top district and to come to this meeting and see the data is like a slap in the face. Because we are so proud that we live in this district."

Brandywine Special Needs PTA member Amy Gutowski, 38, of Brandywine Hundred, said this is the biggest forum the PTA has had since it was formed last year. Gutowski's daughter is a special needs student.

"We really came out and researched how our school district is doing not only to other school districts in the state but nationally," she said. "We are 47th in the nation out of 50 states, and North Wilmington is an affluent area. That's just not acceptable. And we want to make that better for our kids."

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