

Skinner School hard hit by special ed layoffs
Board of Ed cuts 950 positions citywide

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Medill News Service

Nineteen-year-old Veronica Martinez, a recent graduate of Curie High School, wheeled her way forward to speak to the crowd.

“I looked at the kids [at Christopher Elementary] just starting school and thought about the kids who will graduate from elementary school next year,” Martinez said, her voice growing stronger as she spoke. “I’m worried about their futures.”

Martinez is one of dozens from a coalition of Chicago advocacy groups who converged in the lobby of the Board of education headquarters, 125 S. Clark St., June 28 to protest the Board’s budget cuts that will slice into special education funding. According to Designs for Change, an education advocacy group, Skinner Classical School in the West Loop will be hardest hit by the changes.

Data released by Designs for Change indicates Skinner School will lose the greatest number of special education staff under the new budget.

Currently Skinner has 82 special education students who work with 12 teachers and 21 aides. The board’s decision will mean Skinner will retain the same number of students with only seven teachers and four aides.

“The population [of disabled students] hasn’t been reduced enough to cut so severely,” said Donald Moore, executive director of Designs for Change.

The board’s plan eliminates 750 special education teacher aides and 200 special education teachers, saving the district \$26.5 million.

The plan was part of the board’s new budget for fiscal year 2007, which was approved unanimously at Wednesday’s meeting.

At the meeting, Chicago Teachers Union President Marilyn Stewart recalled her days as a special education teacher. “Four of us teachers shared one aide,” she said, then illustrated why some children have conditions that require one-on-one attention at all times.

On a daily basis, teacher aides help disabled students with tasks such as taking coats off in the winter, assisting students in using restrooms, and helping students move from a bus to the classroom.

Moore's organization categorized schools into three parts: school serving severely disabled students, schools with good records for serving students with disabilities, and schools with more than 150 students with disabilities.

Clemente High School, the campus with the highest number of disabled students at 394, now has only 37 teachers and 14 aides. After the initiative, the school will be left with 30 teachers and eight aides.

In 1992, a class action lawsuit was brought against the board by parents of students with disabilities, who claimed their children were illegally segregated and denied a proper education. By 1998 a settlement was reached that ensured students with disabilities would be educated "in the least restrictive environment" with adequate aids and supports.

Advocates argue the board may face legal consequences for approving the budget cuts. The organizations, including Designs for Change, cite the settlement agreement between the plaintiffs and the Chicago Board of Education.

Now, advocates say, the budget cuts violate that agreement, and they vow it will result in further legal action.

Board of Education President Michael Scott addressed concerns from people who flooded Wednesday's board meeting, saying, "I would bet you that it's not our desire to cut any money. But our situation is.... that we are facing a deficit."

Scott stood by the board's proposals, saying it is the best the board can do with what it has. His comments were met by harsh critics, who booed and howled that board members don't care about people with special needs.

"At some point, it has to stop being about the dollars," one mother screamed.

As for Martinez, she said she has what she needed to get by in elementary school but that high school was a different story.

"It got difficult," Martinez said. "I only had a part-time aide, because the school said I didn't need [a full-time aide]. But I needed someone at Curie."

Martinez described the difficulty of maneuvering her way through the hallways, and making her way into class, where she eventually became comfortable enough to learn.

"We need a key to open the elevator [at Curie] and without an aide, I couldn't do it," she said, adding that her struggles at the elevator would make her at least seven minutes late for a 45-minute class. "We need extra help, and they need to realize that."

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