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**SPECIAL ED  
DEBATE**

Nancy Gibson,  
superintendent of the  
O'Fallon School District,  
denies a link between the  
demotion of Fulton Junior  
High School principal  
David Cowger and  
problems with the special  
education program. c4

Whitted, Cleary & Takiff LLC  
3000 Dundee Road  
Suite 303  
Northbrook, Illinois 60062  
Phone: (847) 564-8662  
Fax: (847) 564-8419

## c4 Education

# Parents, district spar over special ed

By Georgina Gustin  
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

**O'FALLON** • When Peggy Howard learned last fall that her daughter was earning a D in her seventh-grade class at Edward Fulton Junior High she was puzzled. Then she was angry.

Howard's daughter has a learning disability — an auditory processing disorder. But after intensive help in second- and third-grade special education classes, she became an A student.

It shocked Howard to learn that her daughter, whose name she asked not be used, was close to failing a class in her first year at Fulton. Howard said she requested a meeting with her daughter's teachers and soon learned that they hadn't been told about her disability, as required by law.

"My daughter has been in the school system for years," Howard said. "There was no reason this should've happened."

Howard, a special education teacher in the Mascoutah School District, is one of a handful of parents who have voiced frustration with the special education program at Fulton. The school is high performing, they say, but has ignored their children's learning requirements.

Some parents say that regular classes have been overwhelmed with special education students, in violation of state guidelines; that the number of special education teachers has been inadequate; that students have gotten insufficient special education instruction.

Michelle Wallace, the mother of two children at Fulton with learning disabilities, said she has been upset with the district's handling of her children's educational requirements. Wallace claims her children were not getting the required amount

of specialized instruction, and that her children's classes had exceeded the state-mandated ratios of special education to nonspecial education students. (State guidelines state that if more than 30 percent of the class is designated special education, the teacher needs to be specially certified, administrators said.)

Her daughter is eligible for 960 minutes of special education a week, Wallace said. "One week, she didn't get any. . . . It's educational malpractice."

### Individualized education

A special education student can have a range of disabilities, from a relatively minor speech problem to a physical disability that requires a wheelchair to a severe cognitive disability. Special education can involve just 20 minutes of speech therapy a week, or as much as a full-time trained aide.

All students eligible for special education services are required to have what's called an Individualized Education Program. The program outlines the child's learning problems, strengths and academic history, and sets academic goals and a strategy to achieve them.

Wallace and Howard say their children's teachers weren't aware of their children's programs, which are, effectively, a legal contract between the school, the parents and the child.

Making matters worse, some parents say, is the School Board's decision to demote Fulton's principal, David Cowger, who was new on the job at the beginning of the school year. Students rallied in support of Cowger at a recent School Board meeting and wore T-shirts at school saying they were members of his "team."

Wallace and others say they believe he's being demoted because he inherited problems with the special education program, and then encountered a group of par-

ents who wouldn't let those problems slide.

"I believe he was released because he couldn't make us go away," Wallace said.

### The district responds

The school district's superintendent, Nancy Gibson, said no connection exists between Cowger's demotion and problems with the special education program.

Gibson referred questions about specific complaints to Brooke Whitted, the district's attorney for special education. Whitted said he could not answer specific questions because that would identify the children.

He said some parents are "basically waging a media campaign to put pressure on the district, and it ain't gonna work."

The district's coordinator of special services, Scott Pasley, stressed that the district's special education program has an excellent reputation. State officials said they hadn't received any complaints about special education in the district in the past six years.

The district has about 3,300 students. Roughly 600 of them get special education services. In the school's computer system, each of those students gets an icon by his or her name, indicating that they receive special services, Pasley said.

Pasley also noted that the district now has a policy in place that requires all classroom teachers to sign off on each of their students' Individualized Education Programs.

Gibson said the district just hired 10 special education teachers, four of whom will replace outgoing teachers. That's a net gain of six. The district also recently hired an independent consultant to evaluate special education and submit a report.

ggustin@post-dispatch.com | 618-624-2645