

State Leans on Private Schools for Disabled

By Maribeth Vander Weele
Staff Writer

Standards Raised to Match Public Programs

Under pressure from the federal government, the Illinois State Board of Education has agreed to raise private special education tools to meet the same standards required of public schools.

The new rules, which apply only to schools that receive government aid, reverse a long tradition of imposing separate sets of standards for private and public schools in Illinois.

The federal government alleged that such differing standards are discriminatory and threatened to

cut funding to the state.

The new rules require that, as in public schools, all private special education teachers be certified in their specialties.

Only 25 percent of private school staff now must be certified or have training, said Kenneth A. Mines, regional director of the Office of Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education.

"We're looking for staff and administrators to be specially trained to the same extent [as in public schools]," Mines said. "You

would not have a math teacher attempting to teach music."

The state board also will also require private schools to meet the public schools' ratio of five to 15 students per teacher.

Each private school that receives federal funding must demonstrate at least a 67 percent compliance by the fall of 1995, according to the state agreement. As in public schools, the rule allows some exceptions.

Regulation of private schools has long been sought by advocates

for the disabled, who say that state special education aid formulas unfairly encourage placing students in private schools.

The impact will depend on how strictly the state interprets its new regulations, said Pam Kennedy, division director of Ada S. McKinley Community Services Inc., a private agency with about 30 teachers in five schools.

"All over the country, more stringent criteria have been put on programs to serve children with disabilities. We applaud that and we just hope it's done with reasonable time lines and a partnership attitude," Kennedy said.

"I hope it won't be an across-the-board attempt to discredit private school programs," she said, referring to a recent federal report.

The report, written by Mines and released last December, sharply criticized nine unidentified Chicago private special education schools.

The report said that at one school a child was strapped to a pole and another who could walk was tied into a wheelchair. It said other schools used makeshift toilets in classrooms without privacy shields or curtains.

Based on the report, the state this month revoked its approval and funding of the Mau-Clo School for the Mentally Retarded, 2357 E. 75th. The report said the school did not employ any staff

certified in any area of education during 1991-92 and that it had no gym, cafeteria or washrooms accessible to students in wheelchairs and did not have enough equipment, supplies or instructional activities.

An attorney for the school declined comment. Brooke Whitted, a lawyer for 12 parents of Mau-Clo students, said the problems have been corrected. A hearing on the Mau-Clo matter is scheduled for March 22 and 23.

"This is a philosophical battle," Whitted said. "The kids and parents are caught in the middle of a religion adopted by the Chicago public schools and the Illinois State Board of full inclusion—that means throwing kids in the mainstream without full services."

Advocates of inclusion say disabled children should be educated with non-disabled peers to prepare both for co-existence as adults. But critics say public schools are not prepared to handle such children.

The Chicago Board of Education told the federal government that it would try to keep the children in public schools, but that is different from inclusion, said Sue Gamm, director of the board's special education monitoring and compliance.

Mines said the move toward inclusion is already in federal regulations.

"It's not a philosophical discussion," he said. "It's a requirement of the regulation."

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