

Wallkill's special education parents seek higher priority

By Ted Remsnyder · timeshudsonvalley.com · 4 min

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A group of Wallkill parents are concerned about the school district's special education program, and local mother Tasha Newton presented her issues with the program to the Board of Education during its meeting on Thursday night at Plattekill Elementary School. Newton told the council that she was disappointed that the special education program was not made a short-term priority at the board's goals meeting in October.

The parent, who has a special needs child in the district, contended that reading apprehension needs to be bolstered in Wallkill schools. "If my child learns nothing else from his education, I want him to come out learning how to read and learning how to write," she told the board during the public comment portion of the meeting. "If he can't do that, there's not a lot else that they can do to be functional in society. There's a great need for better training, more teachers, more qualified teachers, either in-house training of special education teachers, training reading teachers. Not only in basic reading that most kids can pick up, but in the multisensory approach. The great thing is that those types of programs benefit all students, and not just those students that struggle with dyslexia. I think you need to re-evaluate how you teach, and we really have to get with the times. There's a lot of students suffering. I don't feel that my child is getting a real public education when I have to go outside of the district to get those basic needs met."

Newton asked the board to make that issue one of its short-term goals that the council identified during its goals meeting last month. The mother noted that her son cannot attend their local elementary school in Plattekill because his needs are too great, and had to attend Leptondale Elementary instead and was then moved to Ostrander Elementary. "It's so unfair for the students that struggle the most to have to make these big changes," she said. Newton said that the district should work to ensure that students can attend classes with their peers.

Wallkill Superintendent Kevin Castle noted that the district will be holding districtwide K-12 reading training for all teachers in order to improve reading comprehension for all Wallkill students. "What we've been doing is ensuring that our reading teachers, who are the experts in reading instruction, have all the tools necessary to address any deficits that a child may have in reading," Castle explained. "One of those is a multisensory approach, which is a program out there called Orton-Gillingham. So we'll continue to provide for our reading teachers, along with other strategies."

Castle said that over the next 18 months, the district is researching its K-12 special ed program to find the best practices available. "We're going to visit schools, we're going to research, we're going to read," Castle said at the meeting. "We want to see what's out there. We want to see if what we have is the best practice or are there better things out there? So that will be a process. It's not going to happen overnight. Our graduation rate at the high school for students with special needs has been increasing, so we've been pleased to see that. But again, we can never be complacent and we want to improve." The superintendent said the district would reach out to the parents' group to get a representative for the committee exploring the program.

The district's special education parent advisory committee also held a meeting recently to provide parents with help and tips for reading strategies at home. All K-6 teachers in the district are scheduled to be trained in Orton-Gillingham techniques and the district is piloting a K-2 reading program in the winter. "The best way to describe it is that you may need a screwdriver to screw in a screw, or when you're doing nails you need a hammer," Castle said. "So depending on the need, that's the tool you're going to use. So when it comes to reading, not all kids' deficiencies are the same. So you need multiple tools in your toolbox to address a specific deficiency. So one of the tools that we're working on with our reading teachers is the Orton-Gillingham approach. The teachers have already attended two workshops, and now we're also going to bring in the training to our schools for our reading teachers so they'll be able to get that training in-house. Our goal then is to turnkey that training to our elementary teachers, so that we can ensure that there's continuity in the classroom as well."

Last month, Castle represented the district at a roundtable discussion in Yonkers where a dozen state senators met with school superintendents to get their feedback on potential changes to the state's Foundation Aid formula. At that session, Castle advocated for increased state Foundation Aid funding, and now Castle and Assistant Superintendent Brian Devincenzi are now slated to appear at a second meeting on the matter in New York City on Dec. 3 to hear the legislators conclusions from the five roundtable events that were held statewide. "I'm going to listen," Castle said. "It's going to be the same individuals there that we've already spoken to and I've provided my input. But I thought it was important to follow-up with the roundtable and to go to the public hearing and hear what's now being reported out. Because I was not at the other roundtables, it was region-specific. So I'll be able to hear a summary of the discussions throughout the state. Right now my intent is not to speak, but you never know. There might be something that's said that could trigger my input."