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City schools are accused of ignoring parents

A complaint says officials are not involving families and others in overhauling failing schools, as U.S.

law requires.

By Susan Snyder
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The Philadelphia School District has failed to involve parents in its plans to improve failing schools as required under federal law, a complaint filed by a public-interest group said yesterday.

The Philadelphia-based Education Law Center accused the district of shutting out parents, teachers and others from critical decisions in "restructuring" nearly 100 schools that have qualified for overhaul under the No Child Left Behind law. It also said the district might be in violation of the law for failing to create restructuring plans for many of the schools. Those restructuring plans could include hiring an outside group to run a school or changing the curriculum.

The district, the law center alleged, has turned over schools to outside managers, created a special region of troubled schools for new interventions, and changed grade configurations at schools, all without adequate input.

The complaint, believed to be the first of its kind in the state, was filed with the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Division of Federal Programs.

The No Child Left Behind regulations, the law center maintains, require that teachers, parents whose children attend the schools, and other involved parties be included in crafting a "reform plan."

"It's a problem that could be solved by reaching out to parents, students and teacher groups around the city that are interested in being involved in some of these big decisions and setting up a process that would enable them to do that," Len Rieser, codirector of the center, said in an interview yesterday.

Schools chief Paul Vallas yesterday disputed the law center's allegations. The school system, he said, has a districtwide parental involvement plan, and all schools qualifying for overhaul have improvement plans, he asserted. Parent representatives sign off on those plans, he said.

"I think this is a complaint without merit," he said.

Pennsylvania's Education Department will investigate the complaint within 60 days of its receipt and issue findings, spokesman Michael Storm said.

Since No Child Left Behind took effect, the state has received fewer than a dozen complaints on compliance issues, and none on parental involvement, Storm said.

New Jersey's Department of Education also reports no complaints on parental involvement; it requires schools to certify in writing that they have followed the parental component of the law.

Representatives of several Philadelphia groups endorsed the complaint yesterday.

"We do think the school district makes an effort to include parents, but we'd like to see more of the parents' opinions actually included in the decision-making process," said Ali Kronley, head organizer for the Philadelphia office of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN).

Pat Raymond, president of the Home and School Council, the district's parents group, said parents had largely been excluded.

"I honestly don't know what they're doing with parents in regards to the schools in Corrective Action II. They have not included us," she said.

Derrick Stephens, an 11th grader at Mastbaum Vocational Technical School - one of the schools tagged for restructuring - said he felt ignored.

"They're not letting us know that much about it," said Stephens, a member of Youth United for Change, a student advocacy group. "What's going to happen to our school?"

The law center also said the district had failed to provide copies of restructuring plans for many of the schools, but instead handed over safety plans.

"Obviously, if restructuring plans do not exist for some or all schools, this is inconsistent with NCLB," the complaint said.

The district, the law center contends, has made some attempts to include parents and community members, including seeking their input in the planning for new high schools for West Philadelphia and Kensington. But that approach, the complaint states, "is the exception rather than the norm."

The complaint applies to 97 of the district's schools that are in "Corrective Action II," which means they have failed to make "adequate yearly progress" for more than three years. The law requires the district to develop "restructuring plans" for those schools with community input.

The district, the center maintains in its complaint, is required to develop districtwide and school-specific plans on parental involvement, with parent participation. It also must explain to parents how they can become involved in helping with improvement plans.

All parents, not just select groups, must be extended invitations to participate, the complaint said.

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