EBR special education plan returned for revisions

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The East Baton Rouge Parish School System's plan for special education—which also serves as an application for $1.5 million in state and federal funds—has been returned by the state education department, accompanied by orders to revise 85 areas in the plan.

According to a letter written by Paulette Thomas, assistant superintendent for special education for the state, the school system staff has 30 days to fix the problems in the plan. After the staff has modified the plan, Superintendent Bernaaf Weiss and School Board President Robert Crawford must sign it.

Horace White, associate superintendent for pupil services for the parish, said Wednesday night that the number was normal for the school system.

"I would say that's about par for the course," he said of the 85 citations. "We're going to comply, of course. We're going to get all our stuff in line and in compliance."

"Every year we get a high number of citations for minor things," he said.

The plan works as an outline for educating special education children and as an application for federal and state funds for the school system. At a public hearing in August, parents of special education children raised questions concerning the document. State law does not ensure that those questions raised at public hearings be answered and parents said at a later meeting that their questions were not answered.

However, many of the problems that the parents said they had with the plan are similar to the revisions the state ordered.

The ordered changes concern everything from clarification of job descriptions to justifying planned expenditures.

Eight of the changes involve the confidentiality of a student's records—one of the subjects about which the parents were concerned.

Among other things, the state ordered the parish to put one person in charge of assuring the confidentiality of records and to name that person in the plan. The parish also must educate parents of special education children of the rights of their children, the state said.

A number of the changes relate to another concern raised at the public meeting—the need for the least restrictive environment, or LRE for short. State and federal law require that a school system do everything it can to put a special education child in contact with other children, in the least restrictive environment.

The state ordered the school system to assure handicapped children "physical, social, academic and community integration with non-handicapped peers."

"LRE standards are either not addressed or addressed in such a way that the standards are not clearly maintained," the state document reads.

One portion of the parish plan "is ambiguous and could be misinterpreted," the document reads.

The state also told the parish to add LRE to its list of goals.

The document suggested that the parish revise several budget items. According to the document, each budget must be based on "clearly identified needs, goals and objectives." The document listed nine budget items for which needs were not identified—several of which the parents at the public meeting had asked the school system to justify.

The parish must add to its goals plans to develop comprehensive services for children from birth to age 5, the state said. The state also called for minor changes in the way a student's individual education plan is set up.

After the state receives copies of the revisions, personnel will determine if the new plan meets criteria for approval, the letter states.