

Collier schools' program for chronically ill students is broken, couple says

By KATHERINE ALBERS

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Brian Gerdel's school experience has not been easy.

Brian has dysautonomia, a condition that means dysregulation of the autonomic nervous system, which is the regulator of the organs in the body. As a result, he cannot stand or sit upright for long periods of time without his body swelling.

The 2007 Barron Collier High School student has been taught by Collier County teachers at home since his diagnosis in middle school.

But it isn't his illness that is giving him problems. As he and his parents told the Collier County School Board last month, life as a student who is part of the hospital/homebound program has not been easy.

Brian's mother, Lynn, said the district's system for hospital or homebound students is broken. The Gerdels said the Collier County School District needs to create a hospital/homebound program with its own staff of full-time teachers that would be accountable to the district, not individual schools.

"You are not educating these kids like you are supposed to if you are denying them equal access," she said. "This needs to be addressed. It has to be fixed."

But whether an entire department is needed for the hospital/homebound students is up for some debate. Vicki Sartorio, director of exceptional student education for the district, said 78 out of 42,000 Collier County students used the hospital/homebound program last year.

"That's less than 1 percent of our students," she said.

Of those students on the hospital/homebound program, 34 percent were out of school one to three months, 39 percent were out four to six months and 26 percent were out seven to nine months.

"This is not meant to replicate a school program," she said. "This is a program for students who are chronically ill."

Students are eligible for the hospital/homebound program if they will miss more than 15 days of school and have a doctor's recommendation, Sartorio said.

But the Gerdels insist there are problems within the system that need to be addressed. Lynn Gerdel said her son often was told that there wasn't a teacher available to teach him science or math.

"When his classmates had been in school since August, my son's classes often didn't start until October or November and he had to finish them in December like the other kids," she said.

Sartorio said the school district has been required since July 1, 2006, to provide "highly qualified" teachers to homebound/hospital students. That means that the district has to provide a teacher certified in science to teach science to a student.

"We have been able to do this for all of our students except one and it was for one course," she said.

Lynn Gerdel said her son also did not have the materials he needed.

"We were told he couldn't get books or that the school didn't have any books left," she said.

She also said teachers were not reimbursed for the gas they expended getting to and from their classes.

"They make \$18 to \$20 an hour for their time after they have put in a long day," she said. "But the Naples High School teacher who has to drive to Immokalee is not reimbursed for the gas she uses. The system is broken."

Gerdel said her son was often told to take "fluff" classes because hospital/homebound students should not be taking honors classes.

Ron Gerdel told the board that his son graduated with honors and passed his Advanced Placement tests, even after he was told that disabled students don't belong in AP classes.

"It is important for you to understand how the district deals with children who have disabilities," he said. "Our relationship has devolved from being cooperative and supportive to adversarial and litigious."

Collier County School Board Vice Chair Linda Abbott agreed.

"It is as a last resort that parents come to the board. This is something we are beginning to see regularly," she said during the June 21 meeting.

Abbott suggested that the district form a committee composed of district officials and parents of hospital/homebound students to discuss ways to make the program better.

"We do need to address this sooner rather than later. I believe this is a serious concern, not just with the Gerdels, but with other families," she said.

Board Chairman Steven Donovan said he liked the idea of a committee, but said his concern was finding teachers to accommodate the students.

Superintendent Ray Baker said teachers are paid if they choose to teach hospital/homebound students after work, but said the district does not have a full-time staff devoted to those students.

"Mrs. Gerdel's description is correct. We have had difficulty recruiting teachers (for the program)," he said.

Donovan said the district needs to address reimbursement for those teachers who educate hospital/homebound students.

"They don't do their jobs not to (help children), but at the same time, we can't expect them to give and give and give," he said.

The Collier County School Board agreed to bring back the issue of a hospital/homebound committee at its July 31 meeting.

The meeting begins at 2 p.m. and will be at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Administrative Center, 5775 Osceola Trail.

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