COMPLAINT FILED AGAINST MADISON SCHOOLS

Targets Madison Schools' Violation of State Law on Gifted Education

Fifty Madison School District parents filed a formal complaint on September 20, 2010, with the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (“DPI”) against the Madison School District for violating State statutes for gifted education. The complaint targets Madison West High School’s refusal to provide appropriate programs for students identified as academically gifted.

State statutes mandate that “each school board shall provide access to an appropriate program for pupils identified as gifted and talented.” The DPI stipulates that this programming must be systematic and continuous, from kindergarten through grade 12. Madison schools have been out of compliance with these standards since 1990, the last time the DPI formally audited the Madison School District’s gifted educational services.

“Despair over the lack of TAG services has driven Madison families out of the district,” said Lorie Raihala, a parent in the group. “Hundreds have left through open enrollment, and many have cited the desire for better opportunities for gifted students as the reason for moving their children.”

Recognizing this concern, Superintendent Dan Nerad has stated that “while some Madison schools serve gifted students effectively, there needs to be more consistency across the district.”

“At the secondary level, the inconsistencies are glaring,” said Raihala. “There are broad disparities among Madison’s public high schools with regard to the number of honors, advanced/accelerated, and AP courses each one offers. Also, each school imposes different requirements and restrictions on students seeking advanced courses. Surprisingly, Madison’s much touted West High School offers the fewest advanced course options for ninth and tenth graders. While the other schools offer various levels of English, science, and social science, Madison West requires all students to follow a standardized program of academic courses, regardless of their ability.
This means that students with SAT/ACT scores already exceeding those of most West seniors (obtained via participation in the Northwestern University Midwest Area Talent Search program) must sit through the same courses as students working at basic and emerging proficiency levels.

Last April, a group of 107 parents sent a petition to the Madison School District administration calling for Madison West to provide advanced, accelerated sections of its ninth and tenth grade core courses and to use equitable qualifying measures for students seeking access to the classes. In response, Superintendent Nerad directed the school to start offering honors sections of English and social studies, and to open the school’s exclusive Accelerated Biology course to all students with high capability and motivation in science. When teachers and building administrators protested, however, Nerad retracted the directive. Parents, still waiting for progress, submitted the petition again in July, this time with more than 185 signatures.

"We're not calling on West to change its core system for students who feel well served by it," said longtime parent advocate Laurie Frost. "We're simply asking the school to acknowledge that it's not working for all students. We're also asking West to honor the District's mission 'to cultivate the potential in every student ... by challenging and supporting every student'--including those students who need a faster, higher, deeper level of instruction than what's offered in the regular classroom. These students need and deserve the same opportunity to learn that their peers get, in an educational environment that's appropriate for them, in terms of challenge and expectation. In that sense, this is a matter of equity."

“Parents helped the District pass a new ‘Talented and Gifted Education Plan’ in 2009, but improvements have not been forthcoming,” said Raihala. “Many principals and classroom teachers remain unwilling to implement proven ‘best practices’ in gifted education. This is not a matter of funding, but rather of philosophy and politics. Specifically, many educators object to grouping gifted students together for advanced instruction. Instead, they place advanced students in basic classrooms in the hope that they will serve as role models for other classmates. District authorities claim to meet all students’ needs through ‘differentiation,’ but classrooms commonly span such a wide range of abilities that teachers’ time and attention wear thin. When this happens, gifted students fall through the cracks.”
Research shows that a lack of challenging learning opportunities during the school day does the greatest harm to gifted minority and low-income children from families who cannot supplement their education outside of school. An audit from May 2000 reports that during the five-year period studied, 27% of MMSD drop-outs had been high achievers in fifth grade. Of these high-achieving drop-outs, 53% came from poor families, 42% were minority students, and 31% were African American. During that same time, only 16% of the district’s students were from low-income families, and only 25% were minority students (“Withdrawal/Did Not Graduate Student Profile, Madison Metropolitan School District: Original Graduation Year Cohorts 1995 Through 1999”).

“Some West educators oppose offering honors classes because, they say, this would segregate the school along racial lines and exacerbate the achievement gap,” Raihala said. “Parents argue that educators are wrong to believe that minority and low-income students will never qualify for or seek to enroll in advanced courses. Once Madison schools focus on recognizing and supporting the talent of gifted minority and low-income students in earlier grades, then high school honors classes will come to reflect the full diversity of our community. In the meantime, holding high-achieving students down in settings that limit their growth does not solve the problem of lagging minority achievement. Rather, it denies our students and violates the law.”

Contact:
Lorie Raihala | lraihala@gmail.com | 608-274-8068

# # #