

State lagging in special ed

3 LI districts among 44 in NY falling short

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ALBANY — New York lags behind many other states in the delivery of special education services, and dozens of school districts on Long Island and elsewhere need to boost student achievement in this area, state education officials declared Monday.

The U.S. Department of Education has deemed New York a “state in need of assistance” because of subpar services and the low performance of students with disabilities. While the designation is long-standing, the state Board of Regents set aside two hours at its monthly meeting Monday to underscore the seriousness of the situation.

Forty-four school systems statewide, including Central Islip, Glen Cove and Hempstead on the Island, have been identified as falling short in the area of special education, either in delivery of services, scholastic results or both, state authorities said. Such districts will be required to come up with improvement plans — a common state practice that often has yielded limited successes in the past.

“It’s a critical kind of situation,” said Regent Betty Rosa of the Bronx, chancellor of the board, who was unanimously re-elected to the post Monday by her colleagues.

National policy on special education is governed largely by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, adopted by Congress under a different name in 1975. For the past five years, the federal government has been empowered to require states to draft corrective plans or to spend portions of their federal IDEA funding in designated ways if they fall short in certain areas, such as failing to ensure that local districts provide adequate help to disabled students



County Executive Steve Bellone and others at the news conference slurp oysters after he announced the proposed legislation.

would “level the playing field.”

Christopher Sortino, chief of the Bureau of Public Health Protection for Suffolk’s Department of Health Services, said the new law would apply to oysters, clams, oysters and “anything that’s a mollusk” harvested or caught in local waters.

Sellers would have to operate at Department of Health-sanctioned events, and show their permit to register. The new law, a pilot program which would also waive the \$95 annual permit fee for the first two years, would apply to wild-caught as well as farmed mollusks, but would not apply to finfish or other locally caught non-mollusks, he said.

The department issues 1,700 such permits a year, Sortino said. Sellers would need to register each year and make sure their displays conform to health standards, such as keeping food at proper temperatures, using gloves and

hand-washing for service.

Bellone said the law, which will be introduced in the legislature in April, is part of his administration’s effort to “make sure government is not getting in the way unnecessarily of industry growing” in Suffolk.

He noted the shellfish industry’s deep roots on Long Island, its near collapse a generation ago, and its resurgence in recent years. “This industry is vitally important to our region and its future,” he said, adding the legislation would help restore a “heritage industry that’s the embodiment of who we are on Long Island.”

Passage of the law is likely to make an important local food source more available, said Chuck Westfall, president of the Long Island Oyster Growers Association, an industry group, and a partner in Blue Island Oyster Farm. “The public will have more oysters more often in more places,” he said. “We need you to eat our oysters.”



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within set time limits.

The Regents’ comments followed a briefing by state Education Department officials, who said New York State had carried the federal designation of needing assistance for about 10 years.

“It’s been years,” said another board member, Catherine Collins of Buffalo. “Meanwhile, things have just deteriorated.”

However, Roger Tilles of Great Neck, who represents Nassau and Suffolk counties on the board, noted that many districts in the two-county region have well-funded special education programs that serve as a draw for home buyers seeking quality instruction for their children.

A common feature of such programs is “inclusionary” classes that combine both students with disabilities and the non-disabled, typically under the instructional guidance of two full-time teachers. Tilles said this approach often has the effect of helping non-disabled students understand the needs of the disabled, lessening the frequency of bullying. “That has ramifications not only in schools, but for life,” Tilles said.

Twenty-one states meet federal standards, according to the U.S. Education Department. Six states have been designated as failing to meet requirements for

one year. Twenty-two states, including New York, have been found to fall below requirements for two years or more. Michigan and the District of Columbia have been placed in the more serious category of needing federal intervention.

States, in turn, determine which local districts are categorized either as needing assistance or needing intervention.

The Hempstead district has been rated as needing intervention for nine years. Regina Armstrong, acting superintendent, said that two local elementary schools had received low ratings because special education programs there were not improving quickly enough.

“However, to be clear, the district is not moving backwards, but is working diligently to pick up the rate of progress in regard to the two special education programs,” Armstrong said. “. . . We are dedicated to increasing the rate of progress.”

Howard Koenig, the superintendent in Central Islip, which has been listed as needing intervention for two years, said he had not been briefed specifically on the special education situation by state officials. Koenig added that he would withhold comment until such a briefing occurs.

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