

Monroe 1 BOCES preschool programs endangered

Erica Bryant • Staff writer • January 9, 2009 - Parents and Monroe 1 BOCES leaders both praised BOCES' preschool programs at a board meeting Thursday night. But Superintendent Daniel White said that the programs are doomed unless the district can find a way to close perennial budget gaps.

White asked parents who came to protest to ask state legislators to increase funding for the preschool programs, which serve children with special needs in an integrated setting. Monroe 1 Board of Cooperative Educational Services in Perinton is also forming a committee to find funding alternatives.

For about 20 years the state has funded preschool programs for children with identified handicaps. Monroe 1 BOCES leaders say the reimbursement rates do not come close to paying for its offerings. In the 2007-08 school year, the program accumulated a \$776,000 deficit.

White said that most of New York's BOCES districts are no longer running preschool programs because of the state's funding formula. "This has been a battle for over a decade," White said.

The committee, comprising representatives from BOCES, Monroe County, the state Education Department and parents, is expected to make a report this spring. If a solution isn't found, BOCES will accept a new class of 3-year-olds this coming fall and then begin to phase out preschool. White said the need will have to be met by private preschool providers, which have lower costs.

Janet Fitzpatrick of Irondequoit credits the program with helping her 4-year-old son, Michael, shine despite speech, developmental coordination and sensory processing disorders. "They were really able to bring out so many wonderful things in him," she said. "It saddens me that this could be taken away and other children might not have the opportunity to be all that they could be."

Mari Fiore of Webster says the program helped her daughter Claudia start talking. "The expectations were high for the kids." Psychologist Danielle Morris told the board that depending on private entities will worsen a shortage in quality preschool programs for kids with special needs.

Assemblyman David Koon, D-Fairport, attended the meeting, which drew about 70 people. He noted that Monroe 1 BOCES' preschool was running a deficit of less than \$1 million and statewide BOCES' deficits could likely be eliminated for \$15 million. "To me that's a small drop in the bucket compared to what it will cost when these children are adults and haven't received adequate education."

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