

Report: Overhaul special-ed services

By **MARJORIE HACK**
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

The way in which special education services are delivered to thousands of students in local public schools is in for a major overhaul, based on a report released yesterday by members of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's task force on special education.

Changes could come as early as September.

In a 50-page report released at City Hall yesterday, members of the task force, which included schools Chancellor Rudy Crew, called for a multi-year plan to downsize the special ed population from its current high of about 166,000 students citywide to something closer to 60,000 within a year.

On Staten Island, district schools enrolled 1,950 students in self-contained special ed classrooms this year. In addition, 2,780 students received pull-out instruction in resource rooms. There are more than 200 special education teachers on the Island.

More than 18,000 severely disabled students in District 75 citywide would not be affected by the new action plan. There are about 1,000 District 75 students on the Island.

Though short on specifics as to exactly how the current "warehousing system" would be dismantled, the task force called for principals and superintendents to play a larger role in coordinating delivery of appropriate services in their schools and for the possible privatization of evaluation services currently handled by district units called Committees on Special Education.

The proposal also calls for more professional development for teachers of both general and special education who will be asked to work more closely with at-risk students in regular classrooms.

The panel's findings echo those of several previously convened commissions which found that the original purpose of special education has been distorted to the point that non-disabled students with mild or minor difficulties are placed in special education settings because services like speech therapy and counseling are not available to general education students.

Officials maintain that the overhaul does not mean special ed services will be curtailed or funded at a lower level for those who need them — just that they will be delivered in a less segregated, labeling fashion.

"There is going to be a restructuring in the delivery of service so we can move more children away from special services and to general education. There will no longer be a labeling, just a provision of services," said Jerry Cammarata, Staten Island's representative to the central Board of Education.

Officials also hope to trim costs in the process. Last year, about 12 percent of the city's 1 million students received some sort of special education yet special ed services consumed 25 percent of the city's education dollar.

The cost of educating a special education student in neighborhood schools on the Island

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ranges from \$12,000 to \$20,000. The cost of educating a severely disabled student in one of the Island's four District 75 schools is even more — \$32,000 to \$50,000. In contrast, District 31 spent about \$6,355 per student in 1996-1997.

"We need to begin thinking of special education as a service, not as a place to exile problematic children," said Peter Powers, a former first deputy mayor who chaired the mayoral task force. "This is a system in which children are trapped, most for their entire school careers, where they receive substandard instruction at best."

According to the report, only 2.4 percent — or 3,854 of the special ed students enrolled in city schools last year — were decertified and returned to general education classrooms.

"This is an insult to the system," said Cammarata.

But on Staten Island last year, 379 students — or about 10 percent of the special ed population — were decertified, according to Ron Rosenberg, District 31's acting interim administrator of special education.

Rosenberg also noted that, according to Board of Education data released earlier this year, Staten Island has one of the lowest rates of acceptance into special education in the city. It was tied with District 11 in the Bronx.

Crew said that the transfer of supervision of Committees on Special Education and school-based support teams who make special ed referrals to principals and superintendents will make for a "more rational" system.

"Right now, no one is directly accountable for the productivity of the evaluation teams and the placement decisions they make for students. If we hold principals and superintendents responsible for the learning outcomes of students in general education and special education, we ought to hold them accountable for evaluation and placement decisions as well," he said.

United Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten said yesterday that the

teachers' union supports "the goal of limiting special education to those children who really need it."

But in a prepared statement she said that "privatizing the assessment process so that it serves the profit motive and not kids' best interests is certainly not the way to reach that goal. Those who evaluate children's educational needs must be familiar with the schools, the kids and the services that are available to children both in the general ed and special ed settings. Getting paid by the piece doesn't encourage that kind of thoughtful consideration."

Reaction to the task force's proposal on the Island was generally supportive.

"We have to do a lot of combing out," said Rosenberg. "I think there are instances where students are ready to return to general education settings and some who are better served in special education programs. This is an initial move and we're not looking at a wholesale redistribution of students."

Rosenberg said the overhaul would likely start with resource room students who currently receive speech services. "The services would remain the same but they wouldn't be classified as special ed, for example. They would be reflected in the general ed budget and students wouldn't need an IEP (individualized education program) or annual reviews. This would be a pragmatic measure," he said.

According to Anne Marie Caminiti, co-chairperson of the Staten Island Federation of PTA's special education committee, Staten Island's Committee on Special Education, which is charged in large part with developing IEPs for students, evaluates and processes 5,000 youngsters each year.

While Ms. Caminiti believes IEPs are necessary because they protect students and schools and are mandated by federal law, she admits that special ed is expensive and that it's difficult to mainstream special ed students again once they've been re-routed into a special ed setting.

And she said the Committee on Special Education is only efficient if "you're an educated parent."

Ms. Caminiti said the efforts to ease movement in and out of special education services might seem overwhelming at first because the system is so geared to segregating special and general education students, but she said long-term, a move to inclusion will happen and in some South Shore schools like PS 1 in Tottenville is on the verge of happening. "It's going to have to," she said echoing officials when they say special ed should be a service, not a place.

District Superintendent Christy Cugini said that although he had not seen a copy of the report issued by the task force, Island officials would respond as directed by the Board of Education.

Michael Grandwetter, executive assistant for special education for B.A.S.I.S., the division of the Board of Education that oversees 27 high schools on Staten Island and part of Brooklyn, was not available for comment yesterday.