



Report: DCPS reported 'human tragedy' as special-ed success

By: [Lisa Gartner](#) | 01/19/12 8:05 PM

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D.C. school officials incorrectly reported their progress in adequately meeting the needs of special education students, saying they quickly handled cases that actually dragged on for years and in some cases may have never provided students services, according to a court-appointed monitor's report.

In one case, a deaf student with college dreams dropped out of high school after [D.C. Public Schools](#) failed to provide an adequate sign language interpreter and some equipment. It took DCPS months to get her the promised equipment -- some of which arrived broken.

School officials closed the case as "implemented timely" 18 months later.

The city has been involved for nearly 15 years in a class-action lawsuit over DCPS's inadequate treatment of special education students.

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The Blackman-Jones case requires the city to implement hearing officer decisions or settlement agreements quickly in at least 90 percent of cases.

The District says it met the compliance benchmark last school year. But Clarence Sundram, a court-appointed monitor, says the District improperly reported a number of cases as closed between January and June 2011.

Some were closed before promised services were implemented. In one case, officials repeatedly sent letters to a parent that the case needed to close, although DCPS had not paid for summer camp as promised.

Amy Maisterra, assistant superintendent of special education, said she met with Sundram and developed new, explicit deadlines and reporting procedures, and is enforcing monthly reports to ensure services are performed. Sundram and a federal judge agreed that the changes were positive at a Thursday hearing.

"Folks all felt like they were doing what they needed to," said Maisterra, who said her staff did not necessarily misreport cases. "But they were all interpreting the guidelines differently."

In another case, officials settled with a deaf high school student with a high IQ. She had planned to attend college and graduate school, but became "overwhelmed and depressed" when the District failed to provide an adequate sign language interpreter. She dropped out two months before graduation.

It took more than a year for the District to enter into a settlement agreement with the student. It took five more months to provide the promised all-in-one printer, fax, scanner and copier, which arrived broken.

A year later, her parent received a replacement. Sundrow could find no evidence that the girl ever

received other equipment recommended by her audiologist.

The District said the agreement was closed as "implemented timely" and counted the case toward its 90 percent success rate.

Sundrow wrote he was "struck by the scope of the human tragedy that befell this bright student and her ambitions for her life."

Judith Sandalow, executive director of the Children's Law Center, a nonprofit that represents hundreds of special needs students, said the case was "agonizing, but sadly it's not uncommon."

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