

Schools inattentive to attention deficits — parents

By Casey Hans
staff writer

Farmington Hills parents Lorne and Sue Leon are not alone in their frustration over the public schools' inattention to children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

Other parents in the Farmington district are also concerned, as are parents throughout the country, who say the needs of their children with the disorder are being ignored.

A parent support group, Children With Attention Deficit Disorders, or CHADD, is teaching parents how to stand up for their children, offering

workshops on how to file complaints with the U.S. Department of Education, as the Leons did.

Parent Cheryl Patel, who also spoke before the Farmington School Board last week, told trustees she took her middle school son out of private school and put him in the Farmington Public Schools this year because she believed he would get help there.

"He's doing very poorly," she said. "I am very frustrated with the school he is in. There is absolutely no help for him. This little boy is crying out."

ANOTHER PARENT, Judith Stewart, is also concerned. Her 12-year-old son "lost a lot of ground" when the family moved to the Farmington District from Lansing last year. The system "just kind of shoves them under the rug. They say you don't fit our educational mold," she said. "If your kid needs help, they tell you to get it privately."

Stewart said the Farmington district has not lived up to promises made during an Individualized Education Program conference last fall. "The whole system just falls apart unless you're there every day, banging on a desk," she said.

Parents say the symptoms of the disorder are hard to describe, because it manifests itself differently in each child.

Many times, "it's just a sense that their kid doesn't fit in — something is not right," one parent said. Some children are more impulsive, can't sustain attention and have no focus.

THE DISORDER is believed to be neurological in nature, not allowing a child to filter or sort information properly.

For example: a maintenance person mowing the lawn outside, a disruptive classmate and a teacher giving a lesson, all register in equal importance in the brain of a student with the disorder, one parent said.

Jan Richards, Farmington's special education director, said that variance is at the core of the problem. She said many children who take Ritalin — the most common treatment prescribed for the disorder — function perfectly well in a classroom setting, and that there will be "many kids with ADD who are not going to be ruled as handicapped."

Also, Richards has received calls from several parents, concerned that their children could be "labeled" as special education or forced into these programs.

The Wayne-Oakland Chapter of CHADD — the largest chapter in the country — holds regular support group meetings for parents concerned about their children's problems.

The next meeting is Wednesday night, April 17, at the Farmington Hills branch of the Farmington Community Library at 7:30 p.m. Parents will be given information about how to file a complaint with the federal government under Section 504.

NATIONAL CHADD president Sandy Thomas is a Massachusetts parent who has been fighting the problem since the group formed four years ago. Next week, she is testifying before the U.S. Congress on the matter, encouraging more funding of programs and more attention to the problem.

"There are hundreds of cases (like the Leons) at the OCR," she said. "It's one of the few things we do with a non-compliant (school) district.

Many of them have tried to cram these kids into a program where they don't belong."

"As a parent, it's insulting, it's depressing and it's invalidating," she added.

In its short life, CHADD has grown into 206 chapters and has had inquiries from six foreign countries. "What that says to me is parents are desperate," Thomas said. "Parents have not had direction. For the first time, there's direction. That is a shift in attitude."

Shari Bohnet, head of Wayne-Oakland CHADD, believes the education system in general "has not caught up with the parents yet as to what this disorder is all about," but said she sees progress at both the Oakland and Wayne intermediate school districts where workshops and training on the issue are offered. But those sessions are not mandatory for teachers, and many times, attendance is not encouraged by local districts, she said.

Bohnet said the Leons' case represents the feelings of parents in similar situations. "I think the Leons have reached the point of frustration," she said. "They started with an approach of cooperation and they were dismissed."

"I think it, as least, will be important to parents to know the door has been opened. Somebody had the gumption to follow through. I feel other parents need to knock on this door while it's open and not let it close."

Parents interested in reaching CHADD can get information by attending Wednesday's meeting or calling 464-8233.

U.S. ruling says schools discriminate

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"I find it very disconcerting that you would interrupt me during a public comment," he said. "If it is my child, I have the right to release the information. The only people you are listening to are your special education director and your attorney."

"Obviously, something is very wrong, because the federal government found you in violation."

SCHOOL OFFICIALS offered no comment Tuesday, but trustee James Abernethy, asked administrators to research and give the board an update on what the state requires of the district in special education matters.

The recent OCR ruling affects more than 100 students plus addresses specific concerns involving the Leons. They took their case to the

federal government because of frustration over their son's situation.

One year ago, the Farmington district was ordered by U.S. District Judge John Feikens to pay Lorne Leon and his wife, Sue, a lump sum of \$21,280 for legal expenses they had incurred in fighting the district on this matter.

Lorne Leon contends the district has "incurred a liability in excess of \$10,000" in handling the situation.

The Leons filed their complaint with the federal government last fall, and the OCR ruled in March that the district had violated Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 when reviewing education needs for students with ADHD — something Leon's middle school-aged son was diagnosed as having five years ago.

Section 504 prohibits discrimination on the basis of handicap in pro-

grams receiving federal funding, such as the school district.

The ruling also addressed the Leon's specific situation.

The OCR "found that the district discriminated against students known to have been diagnosed with ADHD . . . and consequently, the educational programs of the 91 students may not fully address their needs. The district also discriminated against the 12 ADHD students . . . by excluding them from participation in special education programs solely because of their ADHD condition. Further, the district failed to evaluate these students to determine their eligibility for special education or related services under Section 504."

THE OCR HAS closed the complaint, contingent on written assur-

ance from the district that it will remedy the matter. The district submitted a written plan March 22, advising the OCR it would:

- Establish and begin standards and begin procedures for identifying, evaluating and placing students "who may be handicapped under Section 504" by June 7, 1991. For those identified, Individual Educational Plans will be developed.

- Handle the Leon's case through the child's annual Individual Education Plan meeting, addressing the ADHD handicap by June 7.

- Convene a committee by June 7 to review the files of 12 students previously denied special education services because of their ADHD handicap.

- Submit a monitoring report to OCR by July 31 and another on Jan. 31, 1992.

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