

The Oregonian

10/02/02

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About 30 parents and former teachers picketed a conference for special education providers Tuesday, saying Oregon and Washington school districts are wasting time and money on attorneys instead of providing services to children.

Members of the group shouted through bullhorns and held signs reading "End the Silence" outside the Pacific Northwest Institute on Special Education and the Law, under way this week at the DoubleTree Hotel at Jantzen Beach.

More than 800 public school administrators, teachers and others are attending workshops that cover disability laws, court decisions involving special education students and education rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Protesters said the workshops deal more with school liability than with complying with federal regulations. They took issue with one workshop titled "Disability Harassment, Whistleblowing and Retaliation," presented by Nancy Hungerford, a West Linn attorney whose firm has represented 100 school districts around the state in a variety of issues.

"I think whistle-blowers would say if you would fix the problem, we wouldn't have to be whistle-blowers," said Pamella Settlegoode, a former special education teacher for Portland Public Schools who was fired and subsequently sued the district.

Settlegoode was joined by other educators who'd lost their jobs and parents who said their students have suffered retaliation for their complaints about a child's education.

Organizers of the conference said their objective is to give educators information to help them avoid problems.

"The whole idea to do the conference is to do proactive law," said Ralph Julnes, the director of school law at the University of Washington's College of Education, which sponsors the event. "Most of the people are school administrators, and they need to know the law to stay out of trouble."

In her presentation, Hungerford discussed court rulings in cases involving school employees who've alleged they lost their jobs because of advocacy in special education. She said the presentation is not meant to keep whistle-blowers quiet.

"These are major issues that school administrators need to know about," she said.

But outside the conference, parents told stories of fighting for services and spending money for attorneys to get services in school districts all over the Portland area.

"Special education in Oregon is being run by attorneys right now," said Laurie Stuebing, a parent who said she has spent \$200,000 on legal fees in a fight with the Northwest Regional Education Service District for services for her autistic son.

Laurie Recht said she wished someone would have told her when she left the hospital with a newborn daughter with cerebral palsy that she would need an attorney for the next 21 years.

Her 9-year-old daughter held a sign that said, "I am a human being."