

# School enrollment policies questioned

## Advocates say rules too rigid for some kids

BY MARTHA RAFFAELE  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

HARRISBURG — A legal advocacy group for public school students has asked the state to examine whether enrollment policies in some of Pennsylvania's 501 school districts are unnecessarily preventing children from going to class.

In the last school year alone, the Education Law Center has been asked to intervene in 270 cases where questionable policies and practices delayed the enrollment of new students by up to a month or longer, according to a complaint the center sent to the state Education Department.

State law requires families to provide proof of age, residency and immunizations for new students before they can enroll in public schools. It also requires districts to enroll students who live with caregivers other than their parents if the caregivers meet certain qualifications.

But some families have encountered requirements that are too rigid, exceed what the law requires or are specifically banned by the law, said Janet Stotland, co-director of the Philadelphia-based center.

"The whole point is not to make it a crapshoot to enroll students in school districts in Pennsylvania," Ms. Stotland said.

The Education Department

### Group claims districts go beyond law

**Enrollment questions:** The Education Law Center, a Philadelphia advocacy group, wants the state Education Department to investigate the legality of Pennsylvania school districts' enrollment policies and procedures.

**Delayed education:** The law center says some families have encountered delays because districts have demanded more

documentation than is required to prove their children can legally enroll in a public school.

**What's next?** The law center wants to meet with department officials to discuss the issue. A department spokesman says the agency is reviewing the organization's concerns but has no immediate comment.

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was reviewing the complaint, but had no immediate comment Tuesday, spokesman Michael Race said.

The complaint, sent on Friday, cites four examples of its concerns without identifying school districts or students.

In one case, a mother of twins could not comply with a requirement to provide photo identification because she did not have a driver's license or other ID. The children missed one month of school until the law center got involved, according to the complaint.

Children who move frequently due to poverty, homelessness or foster care placements are most often caught in the middle of enrollment disputes, Ms. Stotland said. Nearly 13,600 Pennsylvania school-age children are in foster care, according to the Department of Public Welfare.

The complaint also suggests that the enrollment policies of at least 162 school districts may be illegal, based on the law center's review of policies posted on district Web sites. Since about 40

percent of all districts do not post enrollment policies online, the complaint said, the problem could be more widespread.

Common problems include many districts' insistence that only a birth certificate is acceptable proof of a student's age, the complaint said. Guidelines published by the state Education Department in 2002 say documents such as baptism certificates and notarized statements also can be accepted.

Nearly 60 school districts asked for a student's Social Security number, 34 required parental identification, and less than a handful demanded documentation of a student's immigration status — all prohibited by law in order to streamline the enrollment process, the complaint said.

The center wants the department to inform all school districts about the legal requirements for enrollment, review all enrollment policies and ask for revisions from districts not in compliance with state law, Ms. Stotland said.