

STATE OF VERMONT  
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
DIVISION OF SPECIAL & COMPENSATORY EDUCATION  
MONTPELIER, VERMONT 05602

TO: Steve Kaagan  
FROM: Ted Rikken '  
DATE: June 8, 1987  
RE: A Plan to Restructure Vermont's Regional Special  
Education Classes

Steve, the enclosed report, The Restructuring of Vermont's Regional Special Education Classes is the product of extensive study by the special education community. The topic of regional special education classes has been discussed by the State Board of Education at three of its meetings during the 1986-1987 school year. At those meetings we discussed issues and reports which were preliminary to all that is part of the current report.

You are also aware that the special education community has divergent views on the place and use of regional programs in a best practices special education service delivery system. Prior to the State Board meeting on June 16, I am committed to circulate the Regional Special Class Work Group's part of this report to work group members. On the 16th I will report to the Board the work group's approval or nonapproval of their part of the study.

The intent of **the** total report is to describe our study of the regional class topic, the findings therefrom, and to offer recommendations for change in the Learning Impaired Regional Classes.

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## INTRODUCTION

For more than 30 years, children and youth with learning impairments (mentally retarded children) have been served by a network of regional special classes. These special class programs have served Vermont children well. In recent years, however, there have been increasing signals that the special class network needs revamping. The level of usage now varies markedly from district to district. The placement criteria differ significantly from region to region. Staffing ratios among the programs are widely variant. There are "regional" programs which serve only single districts. There are students enrolled who do not meet the eligibility standards for learning impairment. Sensing a need for changes in the system, the Commissioner of Education requested an in-depth study of the state's special class network to be completed during the 1986-1987 school year. This paper addresses the findings of the year-long study and includes recommendations designed to improve services for learning impaired students.

## BACKGROUND

By tradition, large numbers of learning impaired students have been placed in special classes or special schools. The reason for these children being placed in special classes is not that they necessarily learn better when grouped with other

learning impaired children. Rather, it is because the only educational opportunities available to these children for many years were those available outside the public schools.

Special classes exist because historically we have chosen to put our money into the special class alternative. We have not put our money into helping learning impaired children succeed in regular programs along with their peers. We have not trained special educators to work with learning impaired students in regular classes. Nor have we systematically trained regular educators to work with learning impaired children in regular classes.

It is of paramount importance that educators, parents, and the public understand that the reason why nearly 1,300 learning impaired children are being educated in special classes with other learning impaired students is NOT that these special classes work **best or that they put out** young **men and** women who are better equipped to function independently in society and to take on the demands of adulthood. There is a considerable amount of research data which shows that learning impaired students who are educated in regular classrooms with appropriate support services attain as many academic skills as do those learning impaired students of similar abilities who are educated in special classes. Moreover, those who attend mainstream programs

often attain more social skills and general coping skills than equivalent students who have had limited access to appropriate mainstream experiences.

We have come to an important crossroad. We must decide whether or not to continue supporting basically one program option for learning impaired students, an option which is not used equally by all districts, does not line up especially well with contemporary best practices in the education of retarded children, and results in fewer than 55 percent of its students having full or part-time competitive jobs upon leaving school. This is not to say that the Department is advocating for the abandonment of all regional special classes. We are not. We believe that a continuum of program options should be available in each region of the state. Even so, we know that there are many good reasons for educating a larger proportion of students with learning impairments in their home schools. Several things point us in this direction, including contemporary research, new federal directives, the findings of our year-long study, and, finally, the homecoming successes of several Vermont school districts.

#### APPROACH

At the request of the Commissioner of Education, the Special Education Unit focused a considerable amount of attention on

regional special classes during the 1986-1987 school year.

Specifically, we carried out five activities:

1. The unit staff developed and distributed to all programs a written questionnaire to obtain information on the number and types of students served, the student to adult ratios, related services provided, the percent of time that students spend in mainstream programs, the instructional focus of the programs, and more.
2. The unit staff visited more than 50 special classes where they interviewed teachers, observed students, discussed mainstreaming opportunities, and gathered information on the need for special classes.
3. The unit Chief convened a special class study group to discuss the role of regional special classes in the continuum of services and to make recommendations for the future of these programs.
4. The unit staff completed an in-depth analysis of the funding of regional special classes to determine per pupil costs, uniformity of funding practices, and equity in the distribution of funding.
5. The unit staff conducted a survey of school districts which had expressed an interest in bringing students back from regional special classes. The purpose of the survey was to determine projected costs, staff needs, in-service training needs, and other anticipated needs.

Based on our year-long objective look at regional special classes, we have 13 recommendations for the State Board of Education to consider, each of which can be linked to information or specific recommendations coming from parents, teachers, and administrators of special education.

## FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

It was evident from our program visits and our study-group discussions that special class restructuring will take considerable time and planning. Moreover, we learned that the Department cannot limit itself to the placement issue alone. The larger issue of securing appropriate services for all learning impaired students must be addressed together with the restructuring of special classes.

After reading our preliminary report (November, 1987), many special educators became concerned that the Department's interest in addressing the issue of special class restructuring was one of cost-savings or cost-shifting, not educational best practices. It appeared to many that we were about to forge ahead with sweeping changes based on incomplete and incorrect data. By conducting numerous program visits and by listening intently to the discussions of the Study Group, we feel that we now have sufficient information on which to base some substantive recommendations. We will continue to gather data, to meet with ad hoc study groups, and to make visits to regional special classes so that we can pursue programs and services for learning impaired students which are based on current best educational practices.

1. We recommend that the Department show a strong commitment to serving learning impaired students in integrated settings by supporting eight homecoming proposals for the 1987-1988 school year. This can be accomplished by closing three regional special classes and by reducing staff in two programs as follows:

<u>Classes or Positions</u>	<u>Current Budget</u>	<u>Amount Needed for Remaining Students</u>	<u>Amount Available for Reconfiguration</u>
Castleton MH Class	\$ 85,000	\$ 37,000	\$ 48,000
Otter Valley MH Class	\$ 78,000	\$ 15,000	\$ 63,000
Barre Autistic Class	\$ 72,000	\$ 30,000	\$ 42,000
Manchester LI Class (Teacher Reduction)	\$ 91,024	\$ 61,024	\$ 30,000
Lamoille North Diversified Occupations (Teacher Reduction)	\$185,872	\$130,872	\$ 55,000 <u>\$238,000</u>

Making the proposed reductions would give the Department \$238,000 with which to assist eight districts who want to begin or expand homecoming projects. We propose to assist districts' as follows:

<u>District</u>	<u>Amount Requested</u>	<u>Proposed Assistance</u>
Rutland Northeast	\$ 60,980	\$ 55,000
Windham Southwest	\$ 61,338	\$ 20,000
Orleans Central	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000
Caledonia North	\$ 54,505	\$ 39,925
Lamoille North	\$ 30,000	\$ 30,000

<u>District</u>	<u>Amount Requested</u>	<u>Proposed Assistance</u>
Windham Central	\$ 18,000	\$ 18,000
Franklin Northwest	\$ 37,500	\$ 25,000
Washington West	\$ 30,000	\$ 30,000
		<u>\$227,925</u>

2. The Department should fund one full-time consultant to assist districts which are maintaining learning impaired students in their home schools or are returning them. The cost of doing this is estimated at \$35,000.
3. The Division Director should issue an information circular which clarifies the educational placement requirements of P.L. 93-112, Section 504. The guidance should focus on 84.34 (a): "A recipient shall place a handicapped person in the regular education environment operated by the recipient unless it is demonstrated by the recipient that the education of the person in the regular environment with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily."
4. The Department should conduct on-site reviews of all districts in which enrollments of learning impaired students in special class programs exceed three percent. Appropriate justifications for the enrollment levels at or above three percent must exist.
5. Two of the six TAE service regions should be invited to submit plans for the restructuring of regional special classes. Department staff should assist the regional planning teams in their efforts to consolidate classes and to redistribute any cost savings. Entrance and exit criteria for the reconfigured programs should be spelled out.
6. The certification requirements for Teacher of the Handicapped should be changed to include competencies for working with learning impaired students in regular education classes.
7. The Department's program approval standards for college and university preservice programs should be changed to require teachers to attain competencies in working with learning impaired students in mainstream programs.



A homecoming line item should be added to the special education budget and all present and future homecoming grants should be included in the new line item.

A funding statute should be written which will enable hosts of regional special class programs to bill sending districts for special class costs which are not covered by state and federal grants.

Regional plans should be developed within two years for the restructuring of all special classes. Only those special classes needed to maintain a regional continuum of services should be included in the plans. The plans also should include provisions for strengthening the capacity of local districts to serve their learning impaired students.

Districts which host regional special classes should take steps to ensure that all learning impaired students are mainstreamed to the maximum extent appropriate. Children from sending districts should have the same opportunities for mainstreaming as students from the host districts.

The Department should prepare guidelines by which funding can follow learning impaired students when their placements change from more restrictive to less restrictive settings.

The Department of Education should increase its special education state training dollars by \$50,000 in order to assist colleges and universities in upgrading courses and to assist school districts in providing in-service training in the instruction and accommodation of learning impaired students.

## REPORT OF THE SPECIAL CLASS STUDY GROUP

A study group was formed in January to discuss the status of regional special classes and to make recommendations for the future of such programs. The group was composed of the representatives of both host and sending districts, high and low users of regional classes, and persons actively involved in returning learning impaired students to their home schools. The members of the group were selected so as to represent the five service regions of the Vermont Superintendents Association.

Members of the study group included:

1. Susan Abdo, Training Coordinator, Special Education Unit.
2. David Colachico, Consultant for Secondary Programs, Special Education Unit.
3. Judy Eklund, Coordinator of School District Services, Special Education Unit.
4. Cheryl Evans, Director of Special Education, Rutland City School District.
5. Laurie Gossens, Consultant for Elementary Learning Impairment/Multihandicapped, Special Education Unit.
6. Marc Hull, Chief, Special Education Unit.
7. Terry Hurlbert, Special Education Director, Essex North Supervisory Union.
8. Dennis Kane, Director of Special Education, Barre Town School District.
9. Jan Keffer, Director of Special Education, Washington West Supervisory Union.
10. Dan Kucij, Assistant Superintendent, Franklin Central Supervisory Union.
11. John Ohaus, Director of Special Education, Hartford School District.
12. Richard Reid, Homecoming Project, University of Vermont.
13. Richard Schattman, Special Education Director, Franklin Northwest supervisory Union.
14. Jacque Thousand, Homecoming Project, University of Vermont.
15. Rich Villa, Director of Special Education, Winooski, School District; President, Vermont Association of Special Education Administrators.

One of the Study Group's first activities was to seek consensus concerning the scope of its deliberations. The group did not want to restrict its discussions to the homecoming issue alone. It decided instead to have as its focus, the education of all learning impaired students including those who are served in residential schools, regional special classes, and regular classrooms with support services. At one of its first meetings, the group developed six principles to be applied in the education of learning impaired students.

1. The services provided for students with learning impairments should be determined by the students' individual needs and not by the availability of particular services.
2. Individual Education Programs (IEPs) for learning impaired students should be developed and evaluated annually against best practices criteria. Included among the best practices criteria (but not limited to these) are the following:
  - a. Age-appropriate placements in local public schools.
  - b. Delivery of services in natural environments.
  - c. Community-based training.
  - d. Home-School partnerships.
  - e. Transition planning between educational levels and more restrictive to less restrictive environments.
  - f. Systematic evaluation of education and related services.
  - g. Social integration in school and community settings.
  - h. Skill sequences that progress from no skills to adult functioning. 1
  - i. Systematic data-based instruction.

1. These best practices are discussed in depth in the Proposed State Guidelines For the Education of Students with Moderate/Severe Handicaps, available from the Center for Developmental Disabilities, University of Vermont, November 24, 1986.

3. The state will promote and support best practices in the education of children and youth who are learning impaired through the provision of sufficient fiscal support, a comprehensive training plan, and on-going technical assistance to local school districts.
4. IEPs for learning impaired students should include opportunities for interaction with non-disabled, age appropriate peers.
5. Learning impaired children should be removed from regular educational settings and services only when compelling evidence demonstrates that accomplishment of IEP goals and objectives cannot otherwise be achieved satisfactorily.
6. These principles should be reviewed and revised every three years in accordance with current best practices.

The members of the Study Group committed themselves to achieving as much consensus as possible with respect to their final recommendations. In making this commitment, the group acknowledged the need for parents, teachers, teacher trainers, and administrators to work toward consensus even though wide differences exist among groups and individuals as to the most appropriate curricula, support services, educational placements, and instructional strategies for learning impaired students.

From the Study Group's discussions, there emerged three areas in which sufficient consensus was reached to enable the group to make recommendations to the State Board of Education, the Department, and the field. These areas included (1) programs and services, (2) personnel training, and (3) funding.

Programs and Services: Altogether, 2,163 learning impaired students are served in Vermont. Impairments range from mild developmental delays to severe and profound retardation. To appropriately serve the wide gamut of abilities within the learning impaired category, a variety of educational placements must be available. These placement options can be categorized according to degrees of restrictiveness, with the most restrictive being institutional placements and the least restrictive being placements in age appropriate regular classes within a child's home school. Two federal laws (P.L. 94-142 and P.L. 93-112, Section 504) require that all handicapped students (including learning impaired children) be placed in least restrictive settings. More specifically, these laws state that handicapped children shall not be removed from regular classes unless it has been demonstrated that appropriate instructional goals cannot be achieved for them even with supplementary aids and services. The interpretation of this law has been a topic of considerable debate and has been the focus of numerous lawsuits, due process hearings, and formal complaints for the past ten years. Distinct differences can be found in how these laws are implemented in the 59 superintendencies within Vermont. Some school districts strive to serve all learning impaired students, including multihandicapped students, in regular class settings; other districts serve only small percentages of their learning impaired students in regular classes because they feel that the special services which these students require are best made available in special classes.

Within the time frame in which the Study Group operated, it was impossible to resolve the differences which the members had concerning how to implement the concept of least restrictive environment. The group did reach consensus, however, on six recommendations:

1. Regional teams should be established and given the task of determining which state-supported services will be offered in designated regions. The plans should address all program options to be made available for learning impaired students. The regional plans should address such issues as: administration of regional programs, personnel needs, funding, training needs, entrance and exit criteria, individual case management, and evaluation of outcomes.
2. The regional planning teams should receive modest amounts of funding with which to sponsor training, evaluate programs, and obtain expert consultation related to the placement of learning impaired students in appropriate settings.
3. The State Department of Education should issue clear guidance as to how to achieve compliance with the least restrictive environment provisions of federal laws. The guidelines should state the conditions under which learning impaired students may be placed in more restrictive settings.
4. The state should annually monitor the placement of learning impaired students through the normative indicators project. An on-site review should be conducted whenever a district's special class enrollment exceeds three percent of the total school enrollment.
5. Existing state and local resources should be explored to determine how they can assist schools in supporting learning impaired students in least restrictive educational environments. These include such resources as the State I-Team, the regional hearing impaired consultants, and the low vision consultants of the Vermont Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired.
6. Transition plans should be developed for all learning impaired students when they are moved from one educational level to another or are moved from more restrictive to less restrictive environments.

Training: Over the past 15 years, a considerable amount of information has been generated by research and model demonstration projects on how to successfully teach learning impaired students. Many of the teaching strategies that have proven effective for these students did not originate with special education. Consider, for example, Madeleine Hunter's Effective Teaching Strategies or Benjamin Bloom's Mastery Learning Principles. Unfortunately, we have not been highly successful in getting this useful information to teachers, particularly to regular class teachers in whose classes more than one-half of Vermont's 2,163 learning impaired students are enrolled.

If we are to make major strides in improving the education of learning impaired students and in successfully accommodating them in regular programs, then we must mount a significant training campaign which targets both regular and special education personnel.

The Study Group made several recommendations having to do with training:

1. Everyone involved with the mainstreaming of learning impaired students must be trained in the specific role that he or she is to perform in integrating them or preparing them for integration. Everyone involved must possess a certain level of knowledge and understanding about learning impaired students and be able to carry out certain instructional strategies. Those who require training include: regular class teachers, mainstream

special educators, special class teachers, school administrators, mainstream support teachers, paraprofessionals (aides), and parents. A subgroup of the Special Education Training Council should be formed to identify the knowledges and skills that various groups should possess in order to successfully instruct learning impaired students in integrated settings.

Colleges should modify courses to ensure that all education majors have the necessary competencies to support learning impaired students in mainstream settings. The state's certification requirements also should be changed to require all teachers to have course work in accommodating children with learning impairments in regular education programs.

The six colleges which train Teachers of the Handicapped should modify courses so that special class teachers are trained to work with learning impaired students in regular classes and resource rooms as well as in special classes.

The Department of Education should make provisions for all school districts to receive ongoing technical assistance and in-service training in the current best practices for educating learning impaired students in settings that afford maximum integration. The equivalent of one full-time professional should be available through the Department or an appropriate subcontractor.

The Department of Education should reconsider the work carried out by its various subcontractors who provide technical assistance around learning impaired students. Such groups as the state Interdisciplinary Team operated out of the Center for Developmental Disabilities at the University of Vermont should be appropriately used in providing best practices consultation. The same can be said for the regional hearing impaired consultants and the regional teachers of the visually impaired contracted through the Vermont Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired.

Special class teachers who have demonstrated competence in working with learning impaired students should be used extensively as trainers and consultants to support regular class teachers and mainstream special educators who work with learning impaired students.

The Department of Education should increase its special education state training dollars by \$50,000 in order to (1) assist colleges and universities in upgrading



courses in which future preschool, elementary, and secondary teachers are trained to effectively instruct and accommodate learning impaired students and (2) to assist school districts in providing in-service training in the education of learning impaired students.

Funding; The Study Group acknowledged that the current system for funding programs and services for students with learning impairments has some serious flaws which must be corrected. However, any effort to serve greater numbers of learning impaired students in regular or less restrictive settings will not represent a cost savings measure. The support services needed by learning impaired students remain the same irrespective of the nature of their primary placement.

A major effort to increase the access of learning impaired students to mainstream experiences cannot be accomplished within present funding levels for special education. A modest amount of the needed funds can be obtained from the restructuring of current special classes. Districts may have to bear a portion of the increased costs associated with achieving maximum integration of learning impaired students. The state too will have to share in any overall cost increases.

The Study Group made seven recommendations having to do with funding:

1. All learning impaired students whether taught in mainstream or special class programs should generate sufficient state and local dollars to meet their instructional and related services needs.

2. State statutes and policies should be changed so that dollars may follow learning impaired students when they are returned to home school programs which have a mainstreaming emphasis. Included in this would be a statutory change which allows host districts to bill sending districts for a portion of the costs to operate special classes.
3. The costs of related services such as speech and language pathology or occupational and physical therapy must be considered when projecting the costs of returning students to regular classes. Prior to returning learning impaired students to integrated settings, procedures should be in place to ensure continuation of necessary related services.
4. The effort to return learning impaired students to their home schools should be identified as a line item within the special education budget, and the Department should project the cost of such projects for the next 5 to 10 years. The Department should seek the necessary funding to support these projects. It is imperative that appropriate funding be in place to support mainstreaming efforts. To bring learning impaired students back from regional programs without the necessary support services being in place is to invite failure for the students and failure for the mainstream teachers and special educators who take on responsibility for the returning students.
5. As special classes are phased out or reconfigured, care must be taken not to eliminate the continuum of services needed throughout the state to appropriately educate learning impaired students.
6. The state should pursue new funding in addition to pursuing funding through the restructuring of current special class programs.

The Study Group, though comprised of persons with different backgrounds and different philosophies about educating learning impaired students, acknowledges the need for improvements in the education of learning impaired students in Vermont. The group feels that a fulfillment of the recommendations given in this

report will move the state significantly forward in its effort to provide quality services for handicapped students. The group, though ad hoc in nature, is willing and able to continue assisting the Department in any way which benefits Vermont's 2,163 learning impaired children and youth.

#### REVIEW OF SPECIAL CLASS FUNDING AND ENROLLMENT LEVELS

As part of the special class study, an in-depth review was made of all special class enrollments and all regional program budgets. The location of multihandicapped, learning impaired, and diversified occupations classes are depicted on the accompanying maps (Figures 1, 2, and 3).

There are 22 classes for multihandicapped students, those children and youth whose mental development is less than 24 months of age. As shown in Figure 1, classes for multihandicapped children are located throughout the state with a concentration of classes in Rutland County. There are four classes for students who reside at Brandon Training School. There are no multihandicapped classes in the northwest region. Here, these students are integrated into the learning impaired classes or, in the case of Franklin Northwest, are integrated into regular classes. The per pupil cost of multihandicapped programs in the 1986-1987 school year ranged from \$7,836 to

Figure 1

Location of Multihandicapped Programs

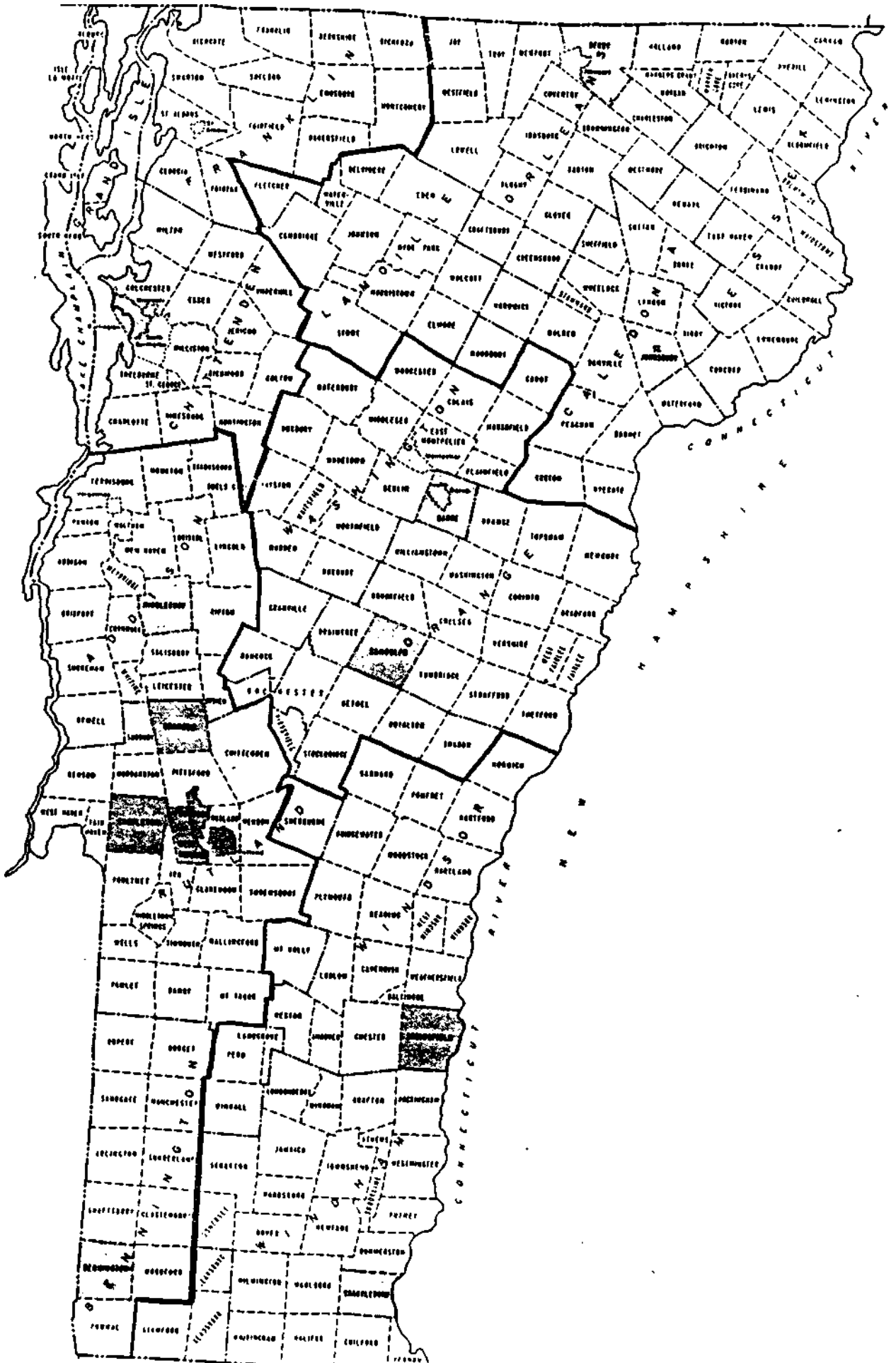


TABLE 1

MULTIHANDICAPPED PROGRAMS  
FUNDING & STAFFING ANALYSIS

FY 1987

Program Number	Student Ratios		
	Dollars per Student	Students per Teacher	Students per Adult
MH 361-87	15,648	5.0	1.6
MH 281-87	14,328	3.0	1.0
MH 151-87	13,532	4.0	1.3
MH 372-87	12,387	6.0	1.2
MH 401-87	12,302	7.0	1.0
MH 441-87	12,037	6.0	1.2
MH 032-87	11,585	5.0	1.6
MH 111-87	11,334	5.5	0.9
MH 371-87	11,233	6.0	1.5
MH 562-87	9,987	5.0	1.2'
MH 031-87	9,349	6.0	1.5
MH 311-87	9,231	6.0	1.5
MH 561-87	9,083	6.0	1.0
MH 581-87	8,454	6.0	2.0
MH 051-87	8,402	4.5	1.5
MH 481-87	7,863	6.0	1.5

\$15,648 per student, a range of \$7,785. (See Table 1). The median cost per pupil was about \$11,000. The student to teacher ratio ranged from 7.0 students per teacher to 3.0 students. Adding in the number of teacher aides gives an average student to adult ratio of 1.3 students per adult. Classes for the 1986-1987 school year ranged from two students per adult to less than one student per adult. Some of the staff reductions shown in Recommendation #1 grew out of these analyses of student to teacher ratios.

Some 445 learning impaired students of high school age are served through a network of 17 diversified occupations programs. (See Figure 2). All but two of the diversified occupations programs are located in area vocational centers, thus assuring a good measure of geographical accessibility. Diversified occupations classes typically consist of four components (each having one or more teachers): academics, heavy lab, light lab, and community-based job training.

The FY 1987 per pupil cost for diversified occupations programs ranged from a high of \$9,785 per student to \$2,848, a range of \$6,937. (See Table 2). The median cost was around \$6,000. The ratio of students to teachers ranged from a high of 13 students to a low of 3.7, a range of 9.3 students. The number of students per adult ranged from 8.0 students to 2.7. There was a positive correlation between per pupil costs and student-to-teacher ratios.

Location of Diversified Occupations Programs

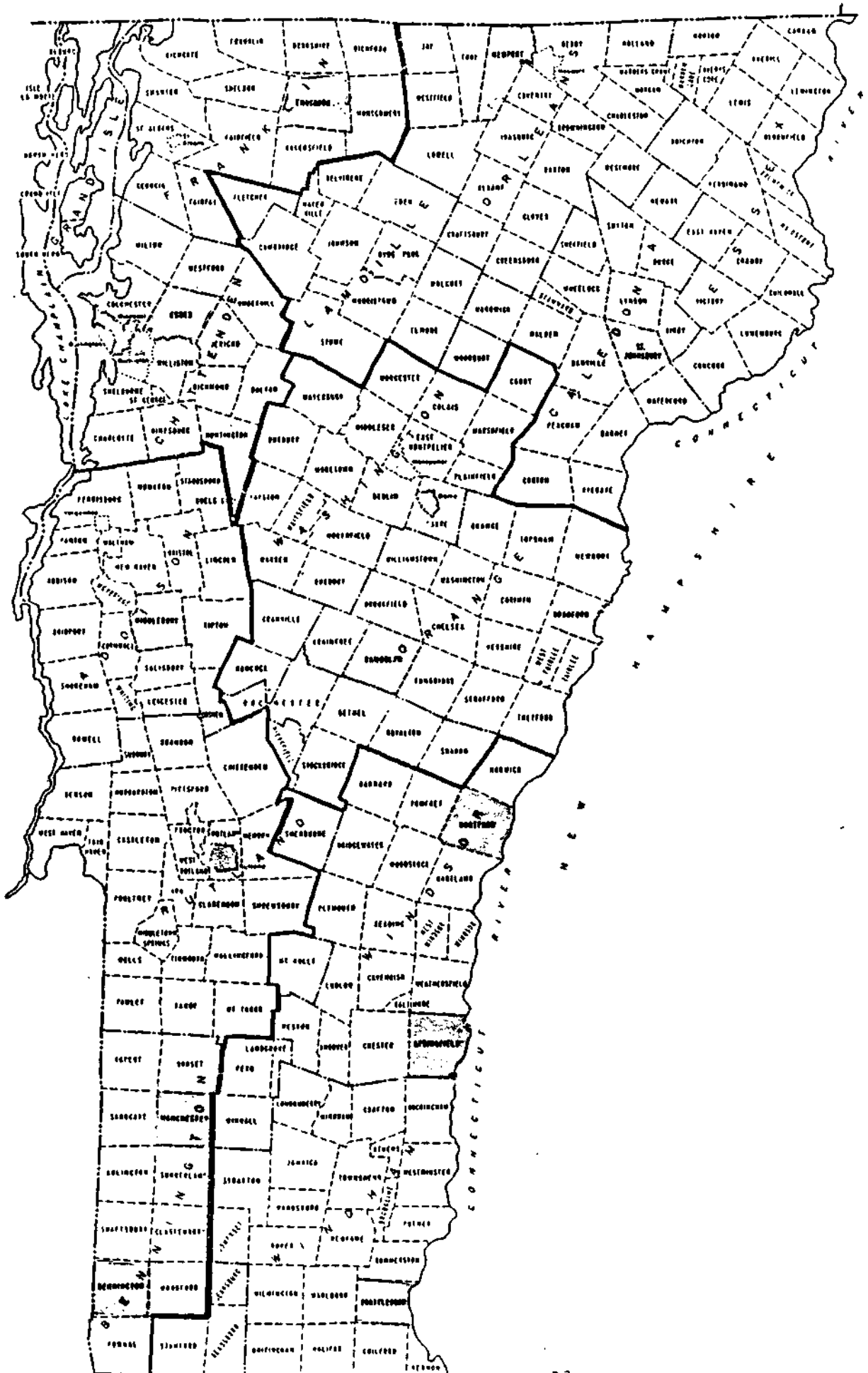


TABLE 2

DIVERSIFIED OCCUPATIONS PROGRAMS  
FUNDING & STAFFING ANALYSIS

FY 1987

Program Number	Dollars per Student	Student Ratios	
		Students per Teacher	Students per Adult
DO 251-87	9,785	3.7	2.7
DO 031-87	8,588	4.8	2.9
DO 441-87	8,150	4.4	3.2
DO 701-87	7,992	5.0	4.2
DO 281-87	7,490	4.8	3.8
DO 481-87	7,072	4.8	4.1
DO 271-87	6,874	8.0	4.0
DO 051-87	6,506	5.8	4.1
DO 201-87	6,412	5.0	5.0
DO 131-87	5,761	6.7	5.0
DO 541-87	5,414	8.0	8.0
DO 151-87	5,052	7.7	5.8
DO 561-87	5,001	6.8	4.4
DO 401-87	3,956	11.0	7.3
DO 711-87	3,725	9.5	6.3
DO 311-87	2,848	13.0	6.5



Learning impaired children between the ages of 6 and 14 are served by a network of 74 special classes located throughout Vermont (See Figure 3). The children served in these classes have mild to moderate delays in development and achievement. The per pupil costs for these programs ranged from \$3,014 to \$15,171 a range of \$12,157 (See Table 3). The median cost of classes for learning impaired students is about \$5,500. Student to teacher ratios in these vary quite markedly from 12.5 students per teacher to three students per teacher, a range of 11.5. The average ratio for these programs is six students per teacher.

From these data, one can see the significant disparities which exist among programs with respect to both costs and student to staff ratios. In giving budget guidance for FY 1988, we began a process for reducing the variance reported in the three tables. These analyses illustrate the need for continued study of special classes by the Department and by regional planning teams (Recommendation #10).

#### REGIONAL SPECIAL CLASS REVIEWS

As part of their review of regional special class programs, the consultants in the Special Education Unit visited more than 50 special classes in 17 of the state's 34 host districts. While on site, the consultants interviewed special education

FIGURE 2

# Location of Learning Impaired Programs

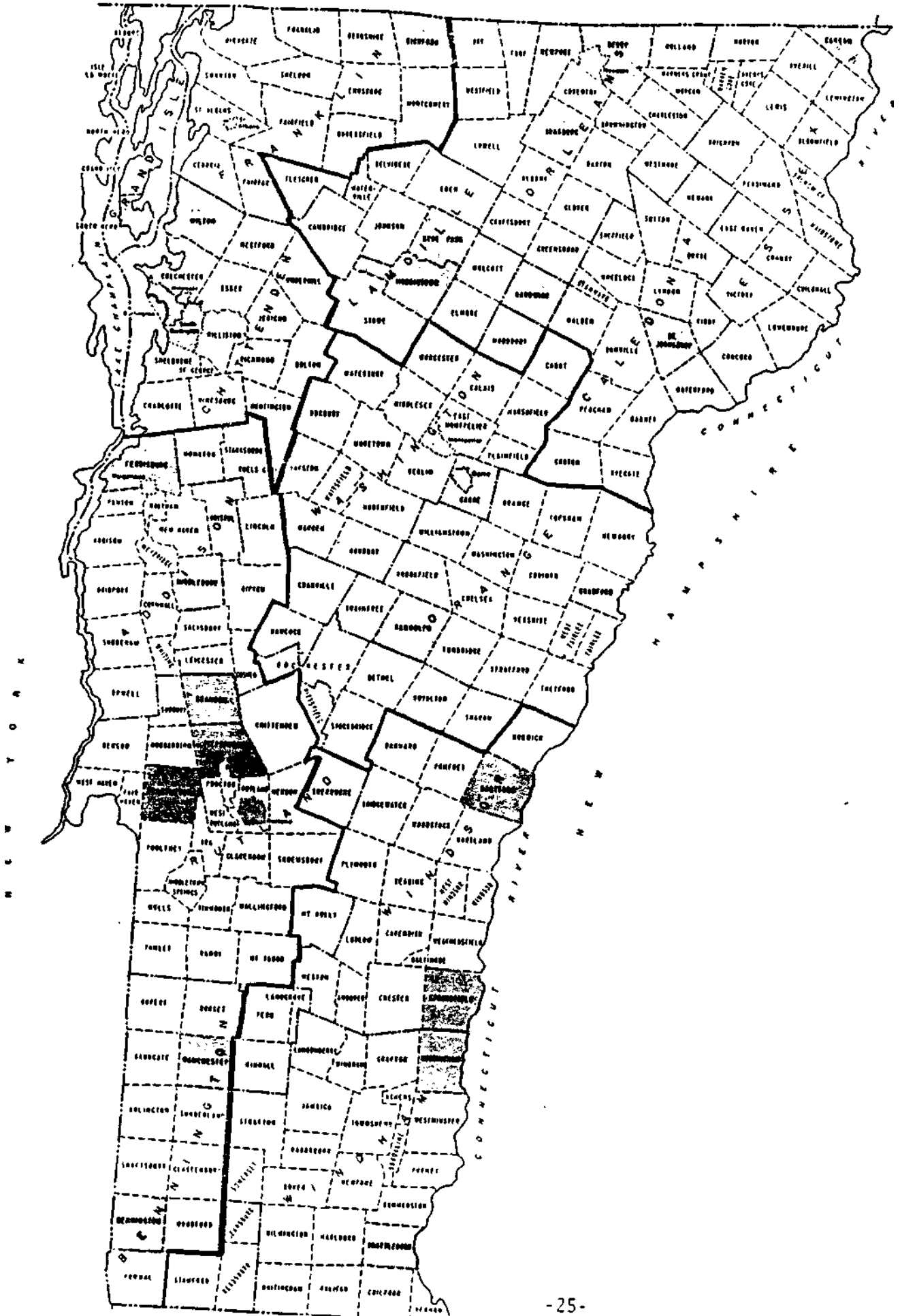


TABLE 3

LEARNING IMPAIRED PROGRAMS  
FUNDING & STAFFING ANALYSIS

FY 1987

Program Number	Student Ratios		
	Dollars per Student	Students per Teacher	Students per Adult
LI 061-87	15,171	3.0	2.0
LI 161-87	13,732	3.9	1.8
LI 231-87	12,518	4.0	2.0
LI 351-87	10,394	4.0	2.0
LI 031-87	10,183	6.0	3.0
LI 011-87	8,675	6.0	1.5
LI 151-87	8,139	5.7	3.1
LI 241-87	8,121	3.0	3.0
LI 191-87	7,503	5.0	2.5
LI 341-87	7,256	4.5	2.3
LI 271-87	6,999	6.3	2.7
LI 581-87	6,546	7.3	4.1
LI 111-87	5,720	6.2	4.1
LI 251-87	5,704	3.5	1.0
LI 481-87	5,690	8.3	5.5
LI 261-87	5,481	4.9	3.8
LI 561-87	5,437	8.3	5.0
LI 311-87	5,344	6.9	4.0
LI 441-87	5,127	7.5	2.7
LI 041-87	4,941	8.7	3.7

Table 3 - Learning Impaired Programs continued

LI 471-87	4,814	<b>6.3</b>
LI 051-87	4,751	7.7
LI 401-87	4,496	10.0
LI 361-87	4,379	8.0
LI 281-87	4,056	<b>9.3</b>
LI 101-87	3,733	10.0
LI 541-87	3,123	<b>12.5</b>
LI 201-87	<b>3,014</b>	11.0

administrators, special class teachers, and regular education teachers. Each interview followed a particular format which the consultants had developed as a group. More than 100 teachers and administrators were interviewed. Through these visits, the consultants became well informed on the field's perceptions of regional special classes. They also obtained many helpful recommendations concerning the restructuring of regional classes.

In all regions of the state, great concern was expressed over the educational welfare of students who are affected by the closing of regional classes. Similar concern was expressed on behalf of special class teachers whose jobs are eliminated. Likewise, many of the individuals who were interviewed had concerns for how well prepared regular class teachers are at this stage to work successfully with learning impaired children. There were many deeply concerned teachers and administrators who wanted to have assurances from the Department consultants that the reconfiguration has as its primary aim the improvement of educational opportunities for learning impaired students, not cost savings, or cost shifting. The interviews conducted by the consultants are summarized here according to type of position.

Special Class Administrators: For the sake of this report, only the major concerns and major recommendations given by special education administrators will be discussed. Persons

interested in the full responses recorded by the consultants may obtain them by contacting Laurie Gossens, Consultant for the Learning Impaired and Multihandicapped (828-3141). Certain concerns and certain recommendations were repeatedly raised by the administrators. Among the concerns were these:

1. The Department appears to be favoring the homecoming model to the exclusion of other legitimate service delivery models.
2. The homecoming effort looks more like a cost shifting measure than a genuine attempt to improve services for learning impaired students.
3. The present special education budget is insufficient to fund the full spectrum of services needed for learning impaired students. Why promote the development of services which the state cannot adequately fund?
4. We need a continuum of services. The restructuring effort must not leave us without adequate numbers of special class programs.
5. **Why is the state** thinking of returning a large number of learning impaired students to their home schools within a short time span when we are lacking many of the necessary homecoming ingredients: appropriate funding, parental support, appropriately trained regular class teachers, special education support services, and positive teacher attitudes?
6. Placing learning impaired students in their home schools **does** not ensure that they will form the friendships or **have** the positive interpersonal relationships which they develop in special classes.

Several recommendations were made by the administrators:

1. Give schools ample lead time to adjust to changes. Do appropriate planning and keep the field well informed on the restructuring effort. Support the six principles which the Regional Special Class Study Group developed.

2. Give general guidelines but allow the regions to determine for themselves how to proceed with special class restructuring.
3. Equal funding should be available for learning impaired students whether they are served in regular classes or regional programs.
4. Funding should follow learning impaired students and the amount of funding should be determined by the actual needs of the students: OT, PT, Speech, etc.
5. A major emphasis should be placed on training. Everyone involved with learning impaired students must be appropriately trained to carry out their roles, both in mainstream and regional class settings.
6. There must be a variety of program options available, not just regional classes or full-time mainstreaming.
7. Follow the best practices identified through UVM's statewide systems change grant. Build on their findings.
8. Use experienced and respected special class teachers in providing the training and technical assistance needed to support the homecoming concept.
9. The present billback system should be phased out if the emphasis is going to be on educating learning impaired students in their home schools.

Regular Education Teachers; The regular educators who were interviewed had very positive things to say about working with learning impaired students. They were quick to add, however, that the mainstreaming of learning impaired students does not succeed without appropriate support services. These include:

1. Unwavering support from the building principal.
2. Individual aides for students with moderate to severe learning impairments.
3. Regularly scheduled in-service training for both aides and teachers.

4. Supplementary instructional materials.
5. Day to day consultation around specific children with a well-informed special education teacher.
6. Assistance with curriculum modification, behavior problems, discipline, grading, expectations, peer tutoring, and more.
7. Teacher assistance teams where problems and special concerns can be discussed on a regular basis.
8. Ongoing consultation from specialists such as physical and occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, medical specialists, and others.

Several of the teachers who were interviewed said that they could give more attention to the learning impaired students in their classrooms if the number of classroom aides were increased or if class sizes were lowered. From the information gathered by the unit consultants, it does not appear that regular class teachers participate actively in making placement decisions or in recommending IEP goals and objectives. Some teachers voiced concerns over the fact that the best teachers, those who put the greatest time and effort into teaching, are the first to be asked to take on learning impaired students who in many cases require extra instruction, special materials, frequent behavior management, and consultation with specialists.

Special Class Teachers: As one would expect, special class teachers had much to say about the restructuring of regional special classes. Among the concerns expressed by the special class teachers were these:



1. Learning impaired students learn to "tune out" in mainstream classes because the work there is too hard for them or is irrelevant to their needs and abilities.
2. Many learning impaired students are not truly integrated—they are just sitting in regular classes. Their self image becomes lowered because they cannot perform like other children. Many learning impaired students are socially segregated because they can't keep up with their peers.
3. Mainstream special educators (resource room teachers, consulting teachers, and learning specialists) are not trained in how to work with learning impaired students.
4. Many regular class teachers say that they resent having to spend extra time on teaching and accommodating learning impaired students.
5. Some learning impaired students are being returned to their home schools with teacher aides as their only substantive special education support.
6. Paraprofessionals frequently are not appropriately trained or supervised. Some aides see the learning specialist only a few minutes per week. They are on their own much of the time.

The special class teachers also raised many of the same concerns as the administrators. When asked what services need to **be in place in order for** learning impaired students to be returned successfully to their home schools, the special class teachers had many recommendations:

1. Trained regular class teachers who understand the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of learning impaired students.
2. Ongoing in-service training and technical assistance for mainstream teachers.
3. A functional skills curriculum, not just academic skills.
4. Related services: OT, PT, Speech, etc.

5. Positive teacher attitudes, teamwork between regular and special education.
6. Strong behavior management programs.
7. Skilled teachers who can work with severe communication disabilities and with non-verbal students.
8. High schools that focus on more than academic skills.
9. Strong administrative support at the building level.
10. Appropriate transition services between levels such as preschool and elementary grades, junior and senior high school, etc.
11. Training and consultation for support personnel: art, physical education, and music teachers.
12. Regular education personnel need training in how to accommodate learning impaired students, particularly at the junior and senior high school levels.

In addition to interviewing teachers and administrators, the unit consultants also observed the regional classes and, as time permitted, talked with students and teacher aides. Among the observations reported by the unit staff are these:

1. Not all students served in regional special classes meet the learning impairment criteria. However, both teachers and administrators defended the use of special class programs for some low-functioning students who do not meet the learning impaired eligibility standards.
2. Some special classes serve no out-of-district students. In essence, they function as state-supported resource rooms, a service that other districts are denied.
3. Entrance and exit criteria are not uniform across the state. It can be more difficult to get students out of special class programs than to get them in.
4. A few host districts will provide mainstreaming opportunities for local students but not for outsiders, that is, students from the sending districts.

5. Some programs have as many teachers and aides as they have students.
6. The Chittenden County administrators have established uniform entrance and exit criteria for regional special classes. They also have contracted with experts to assist them in making decisions around particularly troublesome students.

The responses that are summarized in this segment of the report were used in formulating several of the final recommendations which are given at the beginning of the paper.

#### DISTRICTS WANTING TO RETURN LEARNING IMPAIRED STUDENTS

In March, 1987, the special education unit contacted 14 superintendencies which had expressed interest in having learning impaired students return to their home schools. We invited these districts to describe the procedures they would follow if funding were made available to support their plans.

Some districts called to say that they were not in a position to return students in the 1987-1988 school year. Eight districts, however, sent in proposals. If funding were available to support these projects, 43 students would be able to return to their home schools and 94 learning impaired students would be able to remain in their home districts. By closing three programs and reducing the staff in two other programs, we will be able to partially fund the proposals for the 1987-1988 school year.

From the eight proposals, we learned several things:

1. These districts are willing to contribute local dollars in support of learning impaired students. In some cases, the districts were willing to allocate new dollars. In others, transportation and billback savings would be used to cover part of the cost of the services needed.
2. Districts which want to bring learning impaired students back from regional special classes already have stopped sending most students to regional programs, hence they need support services for learning impaired students already in their districts as well as those who will be returned.
3. Most learning impaired students who have been served in Essential Early Education programs are being transitioned into kindergarten or regular first grade classes.
4. We learned that returning the 43 students was insufficient to justify the closing of existing regional programs. Usually only one or two students per regional class would be returned to their home schools. (If these schools continue to educate students in their home schools, the number of regional classes can be reduced).
5. In these eight districts, obtaining related services (for example, occupational and physical therapy) was not an obstacle in returning learning impaired students. Such services were already being provided to students in these districts.
6. The eight districts require an additional specialist in order to bring students back from regional programs. Each district requested a teacher who was specifically trained to work with learning impaired students in mainstream settings.
7. On the average, a program designed to return learning impaired students is expected to cost about \$60,000, including both state and local costs. This amount would cover (1) the costs and benefits of an educational specialist, (2) one or more teacher aides, (3) special instructional materials, (4) related services, and (5) mileage.

Under the final recommendations section of this report is a plan for helping these districts implement part or all of their proposals.