

**THE FUTURE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SURVEY
AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO
THE ISSUES PAPER OF MAY 1997**

The following report is based on
the survey of Minnesota secondary students
enrolled in regular and special education classes in the fall of 1997.

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RESPONSES OF STUDENTS RECEIVING SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES, GRADES 7 - 12.

1. What is special education?

All gave reasonable definitions of special education; about 75% made specific statements of support. The negative comments came exclusively from 8th and 9th grade students.

2. What don't you like or what do you think should be changed about special education?

The most common complaints across ages were the teasing by other students, the image of being thought stupid, and being embarrassed to be elsewhere than in regular class.

Requests for more staff and for more books, materials and computers (like the regular students have) were the next most common.

About 25% reported that the schoolwork was too easy, work was 'boring' and/or expectations were too low in their special education class(es).

An overlapping 25% complained about too much supervision, too much involvement by special education staff in their behavior in the hallways, in their non-academic lives and behaviors. This group also complained about being separated from their friends in regular education classes.

There were many suggestions for change/improvement:

- more discipline for disruptive behaviors within the special education classroom (primarily from mixed disability resource rooms)
- more alternative classes to required and elective classes
- more after school activities and tutorials
- a class in regular education to inform all students about disabilities and special education
- an open tutoring hour at the end of the day for help with any assignment
- more assistance with personal and family issues.

Many students had comments and questions about the testing required for special education services, with requests for more frequent involvement with case manager.

3. What do you like or what should be kept in special education?

The overwhelming contribution of special education services was reported to be the help they received in academic work, including assistance with work and test-taking for their regular classes.

Students also appreciated the appropriateness of the learning they received in special education classes, and the range of transition services provided.

The context and climate of the special education settings was frequently mentioned:

- understanding and supportive teachers and paraprofessionals
- the small class size (for both better assistance and for quiet/calmness).
- relaxing and rewarding place to be. (many students really appreciated the food that was available)
- friendships developed with others in the class
- pressure to do their best, after being ignored and bypassed in regular classes
- the availability of the space and/or assistance when they needed it.

Many students reported that being enrolled in special programs was what helped them stay in control, out of fights, and to stay in school.

Students reported using computers for writing assignments and books on tape as the primary technological advantages of their special services.

The number of complaints decreased and the number of advantages increased with age of student. The juniors, seniors and those students in transition services for 18 - 21 year olds were more articulate about what they had gained from being involved in special services.

RESPONSES OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN REGULAR CLASSES GRADES 7 - 12.

1. What is special education?

Students in regular classes reported at least a basic understanding of special education and a general support for the presence of these services. Most of the references were to services for students with learning disabilities, mild/moderate mental impairments and those with behavior problems.

There were few statements denouncing special education overall: a few were students who thought parents of disabled children should pay the excess costs of educating those children, and the others were from a specific school building where students from several classes perceived that special education services in their building were being abused by students who didn't put any effort into their learning and were given answers to mainstream class assignments and tests by their resource teachers. (Most of these students reported that they supported services for those who 'really needed them'.)

2. & 3. What don't you like or what do you think should be changed about special education? What do you like or what should be kept in special education?

Over half of the students said they did not know enough about the programs to make suggestions. Positive and negative comments were of two types: inclusive or exclusive:

Inclusive:

- Students thought that students in special education were often the target of teasing, they suggested that the name(s) of the services be changed,
- Regular students should be better informed about disabilities and special services, that special students should be less segregated from regular students, and that many students and staff had expectations for students with disabilities that were unnecessarily low.
- More special education staff available, including team teaching and aides in regular classes.
- Even when students had complaints about special education, they usually would also give some statement of support for the value of the help for students who obviously need it.
- They were supportive of the opportunities for mainstreaming of special students and appreciate the special skills and patience of special education staff.
- The two most common suggestions were resource assistance for all students that need help with schoolwork on an 'as needed' basis and more services for gifted students.

Exclusive:

- Other students suggested that students with disabilities should be more segregated (so as to not take time and attention from regular students or to provide a better environment for the special needs students).
- Students reported dissatisfaction with the different rules for students with special needs, especially the EBD students.
- Some students complained about the unfairness of having to compete in regular classes with student with low skills who got so much extra help on the assignment and tests by special education staff.

RELATIONSHIP OF STUDENT RESPONSES TO THE TOPICS ADDRESSED IN THE ISSUES PAPER MAY 1997

1. All students can and want to learn to high levels.

Students receiving special services report clearly that they want to be competent in academic work, and in learning in general.

Students in regular classes had split reports; some see special education students as lazy, unwilling to engage in their own learning, and others see the variety of gains special education students have made with the help of special education services.

2. Categories and labels placed on students are necessary and most useful when they provide information through which we are better able to understand and define an individual student's learning pattern and needs for specially designed instruction and services.

Students receiving special services occasionally spoke of the personal value of the assessment process, but generally these students reported only global awareness of their abilities and disabilities. Most of the students reports were complaints about the teasing and negative perceptions by regular students and teachers based on attending special education classes.

Students in regular classes were quite critical of the labeling process; they wanted the name of special education to be changed and more information for all students about differences/disabilities as a way of reducing the stereotyping. They had much confidence in student-initiated requests for services, especially tutoring in academic subjects, as the preferred method for initiating special services.

3. Most students with disabilities develop better social and emotional self-awareness and skills and are better able to adjust to evolving circumstances when they are placed in what they perceive as 'normal' settings.

The majority of students, from both survey categories, who reported opinions on this topic, supported the inclusion of handicapped students in the contexts of regular education, with the exception of those causing major disruptions to the enterprise, and those who would get more appropriate skill development in special settings. (It appears that the increasing presence of students with special needs in regular buildings and in regular classes is seen by students who received special services as positive and is also positively affecting regular students' perceptions of students with disabilities.)

4. The wide range of learning patterns and needs for support services evidenced by students with disabilities require an array of services from fulltime, supported placement in general education programs to placement in residential settings.

Students receiving special services, although primarily receiving services within regular buildings, are more aware of and appreciative of the arrays of services available to assist them; specifically mentioned were resource programs, inclusion aides, modified curricula, alternative teaching/learning methods, books on tape, computer programs, transition services, speech and language services and social skills training.

Students in regular education generally recognized that there was some differentiation of services provided to students based on needs, but were much less aware of the details.

5. The learning results and quality of life for many student with disabilities is greatly enhanced through the use of assistive technology.

Although students receiving special services mentioned books on tape and the use of computers, especially in regarding to writing, overall there was little reported about assistive technologies. (This is probably because many students don't think of things such as hearing aides, specialized wheel chairs, etc. as part of 'special education', and because much of the newest and most dramatically helpful technologies are used with preschool students and students still more likely to be in special settings.)

6. Many students, not identified as having a disability, would benefit from the same specially designed instruction as is provided for students with disabilities. General education, special education, and other programs intended to address the needs of students experiencing learning problems must be brought into a single continuum of programs and services.

This proposal would meet with the support of all of the students surveyed because students are aware that student needs do not fit into little boxes, that needs for assistance come and go, and that, to the extent that assistance is integrated into the regular educational enterprise, the less the stigma of receiving such assistance will be.

*This is a gross overstatement -
a paid advertisement, I think.*

408

THE FUTURE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION:

**AN
ISSUES PAPER**

**WAYNE ERICKSON
MAY 29, 1997**

DISCUSSION DRAFT

INTRODUCTION

“THE BEST WAY TO PREDICT THE FUTURE IS TO INVENT IT”

The purpose of this paper is to begin a process to invent the future of special education in Minnesota public schools. It identifies beliefs, describes current conditions, and describes improvements in the means by which the needs of students with disabilities can be met effectively in the context of a changing society and the transformation of its public education system from an opportunity based system to a results based system. Over the months of May - September 1997 this paper will be used as the basis for discussions among all stakeholders in the delivery of instruction and services for students with disabilities. Following the revision of this document into a vision based on consensus among a wide range of stakeholders, it will become, with the reauthorization of IDEA, the basis for recommending a comprehensive revision in the state statutes, rules, policies, and/or procedures that direct the delivery of special education in Minnesota schools.

Please note, this is not the final version, it is one vision that will be used as the starting point to give focus to discussion among stakeholders in the delivery of instruction and services for students with disabilities.

The use of the word “we” in the beliefs section is meant to connote that, in its final version, this paper will be a consensus document among stakeholders in the delivery of special instruction and services for students with disabilities,

This paper is divided into three major sections:

1. Beliefs about students, parents, special and general education and the human service system;
2. Current conditions driving the need for comprehensive change;
3. Recommended Changes

I. BELIEFS

ABOUT STUDENTS WE BELIEVE THAT:

1. All students can and want to learn to high levels.
2. Categories and labels placed on students are necessary and most useful when they provide information through which we are better able to understand and define an individual student's learning pattern and needs for specially designed instruction and services. Administrative uses such as accessing federal funds are important but should receive secondary consideration in their use and development.
3. Most students with disabilities develop better social and emotional self-awareness and skills and are better able to adjust to evolving circumstances when they are placed in what they perceive as “normal” settings.
4. The wide range of learning patterns and needs for support services evidenced by students with disabilities require an array of services from full-time, supported placement in general education programs to placement in residential settings.

DISCUSSION DRAFT

5. The learning results and quality of life for many students with disabilities is greatly enhanced through the use of assistive technology.
6. Many students, not identified as having a disability, would benefit from the same specially designed instruction as is provided for students with disabilities. General education, special education, and other programs intended to address the needs of students experiencing *learning problems must be brought into a single continuum of programs and services.*

ABOUT PARENTS WE BELIEVE THAT:

1. Parents - families have primary responsibility for raising and educating children thus have the right and need to participate in decisions that effect their children's future. Public schools are a support system for them.
2. Parents must be provided the opportunity to learn the skills and information needed to effectively take advantage of the potential for schools to help them assure a successful future for their children.
3. The current notice and informed consent rights afforded parents of children with disabilities will and should be maintained.

ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION WE BELIEVE THAT:

1. The mission of special education is to provide and continuously improve individualized, free appropriate public education for students with disabilities to assure they are able to make a successful transition into the next phase of their lives.
2. The provision of instruction and services for students with disabilities has been a long term commitment in Minnesota and while the form of that commitment may change, the spirit of the commitment will remain.
3. The closer the total education system moves to providing personalized instruction for all students, the less special education will be needed as a separate program.
4. Inclusion is a process not a place.
5. Implementation of effective, inclusive instructional programs for students with disabilities is more costly than implementation of segregated instructional programs.
6. While the specific curricular needs of a student with a disability must be individually determined, the range of curricular offerings that schools must make available for students with disabilities includes:
 - a. Traditional school curricula;
 - b. Functional curricula;
 - c. Accommodation-coping skills curricula;
 - d. Transition curricula.
7. While the specific placement in which special instruction and services are delivered for a particular student with a disability must be individually determined, the range of placement options that must be available for each student with a disability includes:
 - a. Placement in a general education classroom more than 60% of the time;
 - b. Placement in a resource room setting more than 40% of the time;

DISCUSSION DRAFT

- c. Placement in a special class full-time;
 - d. Placement in a special school;
 - e. Placement in a residential setting;
 - f. Placement in a home or hospital setting;
 - g. Placement in community and other non-traditional settings;
 - h. Delivery of special education instruction and services to students placed in correctional or day/residential treatment facilities by another agency or parents.
8. Special education has become a failure based model. That is, it has become entrenched in the delivery of instruction and services only for students who have demonstrated that, due to their disability, they cannot achieve in a traditional setting. The education system should specifically identify and provide instruction and services designed to prevent failure.
 9. Administratively, Minnesota has fragmented its special education programs through the identification of too many disability driven and narrowly defined programmatic and licensure categories. Broader licensure categories combined with programs designed to meet the entire range of curriculum offerings cited above must be designed and implemented.

ABOUT THE STRUCTURE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM WE BELIEVE THAT:

1. State and federal policy setters and funding sources are increasingly moving in the direction of a single/blended/unified results oriented system of public education
2. The general education community is philosophically more ready to accept responsibility for the education of all children than was the case 25 years ago. The most significant exception to this acceptance surrounds the issue of defining and accepting a school role in the mental health of all students and specifically for the schools role in meeting the needs of students with emotional and behavioral disorders.
3. Educators too often establish policies and solve problems using traditional answers and beliefs rather than basing decisions on broad-based data-defined indicators of goal attainment and emerging program designs and technologies.

ABOUT THE STRUCTURE OF ALL HUMAN SERVICES WE BELIEVE THAT:

1. It is good, effective and efficient, public policy to align services to children and their families in a single administrative or at least single-point-of-contact structure. The organization of the Department of Children, Families, and Learning is an excellent first step but programs that address children's mental health needs must be incorporated into that structure at the state and local levels.
2. State and federal policy makers need to evolve the concept of public "human services" to develop a unified set of services that incorporates the entire range of services currently provided in fragmented fashion by the Departments of Corrections; Children, Families, and Learning; Economic Security; Health; and Human Services,

DISCUSSION DRAFT

II. CURRENT CONDITIONS

Current conditions driving the need for comprehensive changes in the delivery of specially designed instruction and services for students with disabilities include:

1. Learning results achieved by students with disabilities on state basic skills tests are unacceptably low.
2. Drop-out rates among students with disabilities are unacceptably high.
3. Though small, the annual incremental growth in the use of high-cost and confrontational dispute resolution procedures between parents and schools is unacceptably high and frequently results in a permanent rift in the relationship between parents and schools. In addition, dispute resolution settlements resulting in monetary payments rather than improved instruction and services seems to be a trend.
4. The proportion of the cost of educating students with disabilities borne by district general education revenue is increasing annually at an unacceptable rate.
5. The growth rate of children placed in special education is greater than the growth rate of the general school age population and is unacceptable. There are a number of reasons for this including: larger general education class sizes, better identification of some disabilities, and increased survival rates among children with medically based disabilities.
6. The current array of instruction and services available for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities is too narrow and ineffective.
7. Affordable and effective staffing patterns for the delivery of special education instruction, services, and curricula in inclusive settings remains a dilemma.
8. The commitment to the delivery of affordable and effective special education instruction, services, and curricula to students with low-incidence disabilities continues to be unfulfilled in sparsely populated areas of the state.
9. The continued growth in the use of paraprofessionals to deliver instruction and services for students with disabilities, without standards for minimal levels of supervision and training, is unacceptable.
10. Assistive technology is an under-used instructional resource in Minnesota schools.
11. The continuing placement in special education, of inappropriate numbers of students from minority communities is an unacceptable reinforcement of discriminatory beliefs.
12. The continued belief that the socially unacceptable behavior of some children with disabilities such as Tourettes Syndrome, mental health problems, and undeveloped social skills among many students with disabilities is volitional on the part of the student rather than a manifestation of the student's disability must be eliminated.
13. The backlash against special education on the part of the general education community, based on real or perceived funding inequities and unequal treatment of students, is damaging to all of education and must be corrected.

DISCUSSION DRAFT

14. The availability of meaningful data around indicators of the effectiveness of special education programs must be improved.
15. Collaboration in the delivery of instruction and services to students with disabilities and their families between the several human service agencies must be improved.
16. National and state alterations in welfare and rehabilitation programs for children with disabilities and their families may negatively effect the education system and the environment in ways as yet undiscovered.

III. RECOMMENDED CHANGES

For purposes of this paper the 13 current special education disabilities are divided into four groups. This is not an intention to redefine the categories of disabilities but rather to address the needs of the existing categories according to their differing programmatic needs. The groupings are:

- a. Students with mental health and behavioral disabilities;
- b. Students with low-incidence disabilities including autism, blind-visually impaired, deaf hard of hearing, deaf-blind, physical disabilities, other health impairments, traumatic brain injury, severe-profound mental impairments, and developmental disabilities; and
Students with speech-language impairments
- c. Students with high incidence disabilities whose programmatic needs are specially designed instruction in the general education curriculum and includes students with specific learning disabilities and mild-moderate mental impairments.
- d. Children with disabilities ages birth - 5.

The following recommendations must be refined into state statute, rules, policies, and/or procedures. They are consistent with the beliefs and will alleviate the conditions defined above.

1. State funding patterns for special education should be revised using differing formulas to assure a sufficient and collaborative funding level for each of the four categories:
 - a. Instruction and services for students with mental health and behavioral needs should be funded in the same manner as Part H of IDEA. That is, there should be a multiple agency mandate so that no one of the existing agencies has primary responsibility. Resources should be provided through the DCFL to local Collaboratives of local school districts, county physical and mental health agencies, county human service agencies, and community corrections agencies.
 - b. Instruction and services for students with low-incidence disabilities and for students with speech-language disabilities should be funded based on the current design using essential staff as the primary basis for state formulas.

DISCUSSION DRAFT

- c. Instruction and services for students with high-incidence disabilities should be funded through the use of an earmarked block grant based on a percentage of the total population in the district that incorporates a poverty index. State statutes, rules, and policies must be clarified to assure that districts are able to align programs for all students experiencing difficulties learning the general education curriculum including Title I , Assurance of Mastery. and programs for students with accommodation plans through section 504.
 - d. Instruction and services for children birth- 5 should be funded based on the current design using essential staff as the basis for state formulas. State statutes, rules, and policies must be redesigned to incorporate linkages to interagency funding and with other preschool education programs such as the Parent and Family Education program.
2. State statutes, rules, policies, and procedures must be revised to assure that assessments and reassessments of students with disabilities are designed to identify areas needing improvement and appropriate methods to address those needs as well as determine a student's eligibility.
 3. State statutes, rules, policies, and procedures must be strengthened to assure the availability of a broad array of curricular and placement options to meet the needs of all students with disabilities.
 4. State statutes, rules, policies, and procedures must be revised to eliminate state level barriers to the interagency, collaborative delivery of special instruction and services.
 5. State statutes, rules, policies, and procedures must be clarified to specify the accountability measures to be used with every element of the education system. Indicators and data collection procedures must be implemented that address at least the following for special education accountability:
 - a. Student learning results in academic, social, emotional, physical domains.
 - b. Parent satisfaction.
 - c. Follow-up of student success in making a successful transition to adulthood.
 - d. Placement options used.
 - e. Drop-out rates.
 - f. District compliance with state and federal laws and rules.
 - g. Input data on child-count and resource utilization.
 6. State statutes, rules, policies, and procedures must be strengthened to assure continuous improvement initiatives in all administrative units responsible for the delivery of special instruction and services for students with disabilities.
 7. State statutes, rules, policies, and procedures, must be strengthened to enhance-encourage the use of assistive technology.
 8. State statutes, rules, policies, and procedures must be clarified to assure that the currently emerging and future staff license requirements provide a sufficient supply of personnel possessing the skills to meet the needs of students with disabilities in an evolving and more flexible delivery system.

DISCUSSION DRAFT

9. State statutes, rules, policies, and procedures regarding parent involvement must be strengthened:
 - a. To assure joint parent and service provider training designed to develop the skills of both to implement effective procedures to collaborate on the design and delivery of appropriate instruction and services for students with disabilities rather than exclusively on training regarding rights and how to invoke them.
 - b. To improve the means by which parent representatives have an opportunity to appropriately participate in the design of local service provider priorities, programs, policies, and procedures