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Rethinking Special Education

Edited by Chester E. Finn, Jr., Andrew J. Rotherham, and Charles R. Hokanson, Jr.

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Special programs for disabled students partly account for the poor achievement and the high and rising costs of American schools. Of course, programs for blind, deaf, and other children with scientifically evidenced disabilities are clearly justified. But most of the roughly 6.1 million U.S. children in special programs are in such psychological categories as “learning disabled” and “mildly mentally retarded.” In the last twenty-five years, they have accounted for the approximately 65 percent increase in special education enrollments and huge increases in costs without better learning.

Money, conflicts of interests, and disingenuous accountability often motivate the growth of such programs. The more children whom educators classify as psychologically disabled, the more money comes into their states, districts, and schools. School, district, state, and federal administrative jobs multiply accordingly, and the ensuing expanding bureaucracy distracts educators from learning; Michigan, for example, has some six thousand detailed program regulations. When children are psychologically classified, they can be neglected since they are excused from accountability examinations, thus making their schools appear to be doing better than they actually are. Kentucky, Louisiana, and South Carolina made leaps in reading scores alongside big increases in excused special students.

In 1982, the National Academy of Sciences contended that psychological classifications are unreliable and that special programs often do little good and sometimes do harm. Subsequent research has shown that the present classification systems misleadingly suggest that as many as 80 percent of all school students require special programs, which cost about 2.3 times more than regular programs.

Yet studies show that mildly disabled students do no better in regular classrooms because what they need is better-not special or differentiated-teaching. Moreover, spurious diagnoses stigmatize children, give them a debilitating excuse not to learn, and lead to their segregation from other children.

Special programs also lead to discrimination and unfairness. Special educators more often litigiously classify big-city children as mildly retarded and expect less of them. But middle-class students are less demeaningly labeled (for example, “special learning disabled”). In affluent Greenwich, Connecticut, educators classify about one in three high school students as disabled. Such students may be get tutors, note takers, laptop computers, and extra time on tests, including those for college admission.

The rapidly growing numbers of charter schools suggest a solution: Charter schools are privately governed and largely deregulated, but they receive public funds. They must admit all applicants (or use lotteries when oversubscribed). To begin, they must attract students; to continue, they must retain them and report achievement gains.

Analogous special education charters would work in a similar way. Any charter school or regular school could apply for a waiver of special federal and state regulations. Waivered schools would continue to receive extra money for special children but be held responsible for their retention and learning. They could, for

example, declassify special children, remove them from segregated programs, and provide all children with more learning time and effective teaching, which are proven policies for promoting achievement for regular and special students. The resulting deregulation, competition for special student applicants, and increased accountability to parents, citizens, and legislators would help even more.

[This Briefing was written by Herbert J. Walberg, Ph.D., University Scholar, University of Illinois-Chicago. It was published January 21, 2002 as a Hoover Institution Weekly Essay, copyright Trustees of Leland Stanford Junior University, www-hoover.stanford.edu/pubaffairs/we/2002/walberg_0102.html]

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