New Directions for Special Ed

Mainstreaming, population shifts, early intervention, and budget cuts create challenges and opportunities for district leaders.

By Ed Fink

Special education used to be a place—sometimes a separate school, more often a classroom down the hall where students labeled as such disappeared for hours at a time, out of sight and out of mind for the typical classroom teacher.

That’s still sometimes the case, but increasingly, special education is front and center in the regular education classroom, and the population of students with individualized education plans has shifted away from those considered learning disabled. Fewer students have been diagnosed with learning disabilities, but more students are being diagnosed with autism.

“You’re not sending a child somewhere when you provide special ed. You’re providing them a service,” says Mary Watson, director of the Exceptional Child Division in the North Carolina Department of Education. “Special education is not a place; special education is individualized instruction with supports and services.”

Federal data from 2008, the latest figures available, show that 11 percent of students, or about 6.7 million, were served under the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Nearly 5 percent were served for specific learning disabilities, more than 2 percent for speech or language impairments, and less than 1 percent each for mental retardation, emotional dis...
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Federal data show that in fall 2008, about 1.5 percent of students with developmental delays served under IDEA were in separate schools, and 37 percent were in regular schools, but spent at least 20 percent of the time outside the regular classroom. The remaining 62 percent were essentially mainstreamed at least 80 percent of the time. That’s up from 57 percent in 2004, the first year for which figures are available.

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turbance, autism and other factors.

But while the total number served for specific learning disabilities tailed off slightly from 2.87 million in 1999 to 2.53 million in 2008, and other categories like mental retardation and emotional disturbance saw similar declines, the number of autistic students more than quadrupled, from 66,043 to 292,818. “For the whole range of disabilities under IDEA, the number has remained pretty steady in the last few years,” according to Melody Musgrove, director of the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). “There’s definitely been an increase in the number of children identified with autism.”

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A special education teaching assistant works with a first-grader in the Star Plus program at Central Elementary School in Plainfield (Ill.) Community Consolidated School District #202.

regular classroom, compared with 30 percent of TBI patients in 1998. “Regular education teachers have to confront working with these kids in their classes and getting their achievement up,” says Eamonn O’Donovan, human resources director at Los Alamitos Unified School District in the Los Angeles area and a former assistant superintendent of special education. “Not all teachers are there yet. Instead of [special ed students] being a subset, they’re a group everybody has to deal with, which is only right.”
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Bill East, executive director of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), hopes that the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which is expected to come about this summer, will reinforce the trend toward mainstreaming special education students. “That will help promote all children having an equal opportunity for success,” East says. “We’re doing everything we can to move away from the dual education system. We’re not doing away with [separate] special education. We will always need it. ... But we think there’s a better chance for students with special needs if they’re immersed in the general education program to the greatest extent possible.”

Mainstreaming Works

North Carolina has been regearing its system in that direction since the reauthorization of IDEA, attempting to move students toward what it considers the least restrictive environment, Watson says. “You should always be thinking about the classroom and school that child would attend if they were not disabled, and then move incrementally in that direction,” she says. “That hasn’t changed dramatically for us. That’s always been our goal.”

Musgrove points to an increase in average fourth-grade reading scores (along with higher rates of graduation and post-secondary enrollment) as evidence that mainstreaming has been successful in classrooms. From 2000 to 2009, scores rose 23 points for students with disabilities on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), compared to 7 points for the general population. “Students with disabilities, when held to high standards, demonstrate that they can achieve,” she says. “Is that enough? No. We’re not satisfied. We must have an accountability system that demands high standards.”

Autism Rises

A national IDEA partnership has brought together 55 organizations in technical assistance centers, with federal OSEP funding, to work on common concerns, says Christy Chambers, past president of the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) and a consultant for Beyond the Box, an education consulting group providing technical assistance and training. “The children on the autism spectrum are continuing to be very unique, very diverse and complex as far as their needs, and districts are putting efforts into development and into training,” she says, adding that more published materials are becoming available to district administrators.

Since bad behavior potentially is making autistic children fall behind, training is necessary for teachers. Aides are trained to deflect this behavior and allow autistic children to focus—along with the rest of the class—on the day’s lessons.

In North Carolina, the number of students with autism has more than tripled in recent years to 11,458 in 2010, Watson says, even as the total number of special ed students has decreased from 200,000 to about 187,000 over the past 10 years. At the local level, in the Plainfield Community Consolidated School District 202, located 40 miles southwest of Chicago, about 3,700 students—roughly 10 percent...
of the total—have Individualized Education Programs. All but 85 are served in typical district schools, says Sharon Gronemeyer, assistant superintendent of student services. The district has more teachers’ aides than in the past “due to the significance of the students we’re seeing,” she says. “We have a large number of students on the autism spectrum, and a very large number that would qualify as multineeds.”

“That’s kind of the new front line,” O’Donovan of Los Alamitos agrees. “We’re qualifying fewer kids with specific disabilities, most often reading, because we’re teaching it better. But we have more autistic kids and kids with behavioral issues. The numbers are about the same, but the population is different.”

Pasco County (Fla.) Schools has seen influxes of families with autistic students because the district has a reputation for serving them well, says Amelia Van Name-Larson, the district’s supervisor of curriculum and instructional services. “They move into our county specifically so their kids can attend our schools,” she says.

Westside Community Schools 66 in Omaha, Neb., has seen its autistic population quadruple in the past 10 years. Steve Milliken, director of special services, says this is partly because, as with Pasco County, “we have a lot of families move in from other districts who want inclusive services.” They’ve brought in trainers for teachers two full days per quarter for the past two years, paid through $100,000 of federal stimulus money, to help them address the additional behavioral challenges. “The principals are up front with us in saying, ‘This is so important to us,’” Milliken says, adding that the end of stimulus funding means the district is searching for ways to keep the training sustainable. “We’re trying to work that out,” he says. “It won’t be quite as regular.”

RTI and PBIS

Learning disabilities are not as numerous compared to just five years ago, at least partly due to efforts to recognize those disabilities in early childhood and address them through Response to Intervention (RTI) strategies, says East of the NASDSE. “It’s getting the kids early with evidence-based instruction, with the hopes of preventing many children from needing special ed services later on,” he says.

Kathleen Whitmire, director of the RTI Action Network of the National Center for Learning Disabilities, adds that district administrators and school principals nationwide have expressed that RTI has been effective in reducing the number of special ed referrals. “They credit this...”
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in large part to the fact that students are receiving the supports they need early and effectively,” she says.

O’Donovan says that if problems with reading or math are caught early on, in the primary elementary school grades, schools can provide help immediately—and do so only for as long as the students need it. “Before, the only way to get help for reading was to go to special ed,” he says, and then students were kept there. Now, educators are recognizing that “they still have to know the same math as everybody else.”

If a child in second grade has trouble adding two-digit numbers, for example, she is temporarily placed in a math group with others who have the same issue and then reassessed, perhaps as soon as six weeks later, and removed if she has leapt over the hump. “In the past, these students went into a pullout class for the whole year,” O’Donovan says.

North Carolina has used RTI for more than a decade, and Watson says it has revealed that many students need early intervention, but not necessarily special ed. “We were overidentifying, because any child who needed anything was automatically identified as special ed,” she says. “Among the 20 percent not succeeding, not all of them may need special ed. They may need some other type of intervention in their instruction.”

To that end, the state has spent the past 11 years giving teachers intensive training on how to teach reading, called Reading Foundations, that Watson says has led to “dramatic results on test scores.” The state started similar training in math six years ago, called Math Foundations. Each training is five full days.

At the local level, Pasco County began RTI about four years ago, mostly at the elementary level in reading, and has expanded its use from 13 to 30 schools while piloting RTI in two middle schools and two high schools. More students are reaching grade-level standards between kindergarten and first-grade, but such gains have been less consistent in third-grade and higher, Van Name-Larson says. “We need to remain curious to see what is the value of this over time, and how can we duplicate it across buildings? With budget cuts, are we going to have the resources to provide the multi-tiered systems of supports?”

Westside Schools served as a state pilot in Nebraska five years ago for RTI, beginning with K2 literacy and ramping up from there. “It’s our goal not necessarily to reduce the numbers of kids in special ed but to help all kids be better readers,” Miliiken says. “Nationally, 80 percent of kids in special ed have a reading issue.” To that end, the district has used stimulus funds to bring together reading specialists and special education teachers monthly for intensive training.

The emphasis on RTI nationally has been encouraging to Chambers. “What I see is more children getting good interventions and supports that don’t necessarily have to have a label of ‘disabled,’” she says. “It’s an exciting change that we can get on the preventative side.” Since RTI was not required to be implemented in districts until 2009, it’s probably too soon to measure its precise impact on special ed numbers. Chambers adds.

North Carolina has ramped up Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to deal with disciplinary problems in a more constructive way—aiming to change school culture to support positive behavior and recognize performance—which Watson says has resulted in “dramatic decreases in office discipline referrals and suspensions, plus the unintended positive consequence of dramatic achievement increases.”

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—Luann Purcell, executive director, Council of Administrators of Special Education

A rapidly growing district with a relatively young staff, Plainfield District 202 provides 30 hours of professional development during a teacher’s first year, 20 hours the second year, and 10 hours the third year, Gronemeyer says. The district also works hard to train support staff.

The Bottom Line
State- and district-level special educators across the nation have faced a significant challenge over the past few years as state budgets have grown tighter, both in terms of staffing and materials. “State budgets are just decimated all across the country,” East says. “Local directors of special ed and principals see this firsthand—the availability of teachers, the availability of related services.”
Luann Purcell, executive director of CASE, says the end of stimulus funding has created significant shortfalls—and those who say money isn’t the issue don’t know what they’re talking about. “I don’t care what anybody says, it takes money,” she says. “It all boils down to budget, whether or not we’re going to put our money where our mouth is. If we think it’s important, we’re going to have to put the resources there.”

Purcell says that district administrators by and large already have worked creatively to shift resources toward the classroom and toward the most efficient and effective programming. “Our local districts can’t continue to rob Peter to pay Paul,” she warns. “There’s only so much pie.” Philanthropic money has helped, but it isn’t comprehensive enough. “You’ve got to have a consistent funding source across the board,” she says.

All states are facing budget cuts this year, as well as uncertainty in special ed programming. North Carolina has managed to hold the line on expenditures for special ed through the use of data-based decision making, Watson says, adding, “If what is being proposed is not directly related to improving outcomes for students with disabilities, we do not move ahead with the proposal.” Watson suggests that other states work similarly to help local districts disaggregate and analyze their own data to ensure they are getting the most bang for their buck.

Plainfield anticipates double-digit budget cuts next year and isn’t sure whether it will be able to provide the same quality of special ed programming as in the past, Gronemeyer says, especially given the debt service on the large number of buildings the district has needed to add in recent years to accommodate enrollment growth.

The district ran a $21 million deficit last year and is dealing with a $7 million deficit this year. “That has required us to constantly look at how we can do things more effectively and take certain cost-cutting measures,” Gronemeyer says. “As much as possible, we have tried to keep that away from students—but ultimately, everything affects students.”

Pasco County faces $60 million in cuts on a $1 billion budget and expects to lay off 600 to 800 employees out of 9,000, the first layoffs in recent memory. “How do we continue to do this? It’s going to be difficult,” Van Name-Larson says. “We have done what we have done [for special education] because we have been able to use the resources to meet students’ needs.”

O’Donovan says that “maintenance of effort” requirements under IDEA—which mean districts can’t spend less this year than last year—have prompted them to hold the line on special ed spending. “You can’t balance budgets on the backs of special ed kids,” he explains. “You have to at least maintain the same level of funding, regardless of how much overall funding you’re getting.”

Ed Finkel is a freelance writer based in Evanston, Ill.