

Special Education Survey Data Analysis

The Special Education Task Force surveyed superintendents in all of the cities and towns in Massachusetts using the listserv provided by the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS). The questions we asked were the following:

Question 1: In the past five years have special education costs in your community risen faster than the rest of the school district's operating budget? If so, which parts of the program drove that increase?

Question 2: What program(s) or procedures has your district put in place that you feel are most effective at helping to control special education costs while providing excellent services to students on IEPs?

We received responses from 18 districts and a number of individuals representing larger organizations. Included in the responding districts were four regional school districts. Below is a summary and discussion of the data we collected.

Question 1

The most representative response to the question came from Paul Andrews, Director of Professional Development for MASS. He stated the answer was, "a huge yes". He and several others referenced a report entitled *Special Education Finance Policy* authored by Dr. Sheldon Berman written for MASS and available on the organization's web page. Dr. Berman's report addresses a longer time span than our question. His finding was that between FY90 and FY05 that district spending rose 156% for special education and only 89% for regular education. Commensurately, in the period from FY90 to FY04 per pupil costs for special education rose 115% as compared to 71% for regular education.

Not surprisingly, data from survey respondents tended to echo the state data. All but three districts did indicate that special education costs were rising more rapidly than regular education costs.

At the local level these increases were attributed to a variety of sources. The most frequently recurring causes were the Three Ts -- tuition, transportation, and 1:1 tutors/instructional aides. Some respondents also cited costs for program development for students with emotional disabilities and those on the autistic spectrum, hiring qualified staff for increasing numbers of students who required service, and increasing need for ABA therapy. Two districts commented on an increase in the number of unilateral placements and expenses which had fallen to the district from them. One town described a particularly unusual situation in that during the past year extreme budget issues resulted in large class sizes and public perception (parents) that students were not receiving the support that was needed. As a result there was a flurry of both referrals to special education as well as unilateral placements which the district ended up paying for as part of legal agreements.

Question 2

While the source of increased costs appears to stem primarily from the 3Ts, programs that helped control costs while providing excellent service could be described as the 3Is – in-house programming, inclusion, and improvements in intervention and curriculum. Predictably, the most frequent response was the development of in-house programming to address needs presented by

larger numbers of children. These included integrated pre-school, ED programs, and programs for autistic children. The data from one town highlighted some key points. “We are constantly exploring the development of new in-district models and also working with collaboratives to build programs. The challenge is having a large enough cohort of students with similar disabilities to make it cost-effective to develop new programs. Our best efforts are always placed in the direction of keeping students, to the greatest extent possible, in high-quality district programs.”

Several communities cited initiatives in regular education that benefited all students, including those with special needs. One strand of responses tended to focus on improved literacy instruction and assessment (which also resulted in better identification and earlier intervention). Other districts commented teachers who have embraced a focused professional development effort around differentiated instruction and have applied their learning across the board to meet student needs.

Findings and Recommendations for Harvard

- Harvard is not alone in facing significant increases in special education costs.
- Transportation costs have been a hardship for Harvard and many communities. Inclusion of transportation in the circuit breaker is a recommendation that should be supported. (see report for other recommendations)
- Most of the increase in school spending since educational reform has been absorbed by special education spending. We as a community should continue to initiate and support efforts to reform state funding to provide a higher minimum state contribution and to revise the circuit breaker reimbursement formula.
- Amounts identified in foundation budget are inadequate to meet special education needs
- Children are entering our schools with significantly greater needs which are often identified at an earlier age. A funding solution is needed that does not blame the children or those working with these children and does not place the primary burden on local communities, but addresses the real causes of the problem. Berman, 2007).
- The areas identified in recent years by Harvard as meriting focus (integrated pre-school, greater emphasis on literacy instruction, three tier intervention) are consistent with those identified in other communities.
- Harvard should continue to examine where programs can be developed which might potentially reduce out-of-district placements.
- Training will be needed for regular education teachers as students on the autistic spectrum more fully matriculate through the grades.
- Professional development which strengthens the skills of regular education teachers in their ability to differentiate instruction should be provided.