

SOCIETY

The Special Ed. Fiasco

“Revamping Special Education” by Wade F. Horn and Douglas Tynan, in *The Public Interest* (Summer 2001), 1112 16th St. N.W., Ste. 530, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Before the federal government intervened in 1975, perhaps a million disabled children were being denied a public education because of their handicaps. But special education, which began as a great boon, has ballooned into a massively “costly and ineffective” program.

Over the years, the program has swollen to include many students it was not designed to serve, according to Horn, a clinical child psychologist who heads the National Fatherhood Initiative, and Tynan, a pediatric psychologist at the A.I. duPont Hospital for Children in Wilmington, Delaware. From including 8.3 percent of all schoolchildren in the 1976–77 school year, special education grew to include 12.8 percent in 1997–98. Last year, 6.1 million children were enrolled in such programs.

Horn and Tynan identify four sources of growth. First, eligibility has been broadened, notably by including children diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Second, there has been a vast increase in the number of children included under the rubric of “specific learning disability” (SLD), which includes disabilities in areas such as mathematics problem solving and reading. Nearly half of all special education students today fall into the SLD category, and most have reading “deficits.” Third, some school districts have pushed poorly achieving students into special education in order to gain state and federal subsidies. (Until recently, moreover, special education students generally were not required to take the statewide exams used in assessing schools.) Finally, many parents have lobbied to have their children placed in special education, where they may get personal tutors, laptop computers, and other benefits. In affluent Greenwich, Connecticut, nearly a third of all public high school students are classified as disabled.

Costs have soared. Nationwide, average per pupil expenditures are \$6,200, but outlays for special education students are about \$13,000. The annual price tag for special education is \$41.5 billion.

Washington is supposed to pick up 40 percent of the cost, but it actually pays only 12 percent, or \$5 billion. Special education is a classic “unfunded federal mandate.” But because it is a federal mandate, local school districts can be sued “for not providing the services that parents think their child deserves,” the authors say. Local officials are petrified. One result: Public school districts now pay \$2 billion annually in private school tuition for special education students.

Worst of all, many children are ill served. An effort launched to accommodate kids with permanent disabilities isn’t well suited to those with conditions that can be mitigated or overcome. Rather than merely accommodate a student with ADHD by providing an aide to keep track of his schoolwork, for example, schools should teach the child to keep an assignment pad, organize his desk, and so on. Yet special education has “largely failed to help most of its students” achieve independence, the authors assert. A 1993 study involving 16 states found that only one to 12 percent of children over the age of 14 “graduated” from such programs each year. Far from “mainstreaming” kids, the authors assert, special education teaches them that “they are entitled to operate under a different set of rules from everyone else”—rules that aren’t recognized in the world they will encounter after leaving school.

Horn and Tynan propose many reforms. Above all, they say, it is important to recognize that there are three kinds of special education students: those with physical and sensory disabilities (less than 10 percent of the total); those with learning disabilities, ADHD, and similar conditions; and those with “conduct or behavioral problems,” such as “oppositional defiant disorder.” The first group is currently well served. Helping the second group will require early intervention, certain improvements in classroom instruction, and other changes. For the third group, the authors prescribe what amounts to an age-old form of special education: discipline and accountability.