

Dorothy in New York

The New York State Education Department (NYSED) has been reporting for years that there are too many children in the special education system because the percentage in New York is higher than the national average. Here are some important facts to consider as NYSED starts to decrease the number of children receiving services.

New York State is probably the most diverse state in the nation. There are more minority groups and languages spoken in New York than anywhere else in the United States. How could anyone possibly compare New York to Missouri or Virginia or Oregon? So if decisions are being made about children based on similarities between states then New York is in a class by itself. Decisions concerning special education are supposed to be based solely on the unique issues and problems faced by culturally diverse families living in New York and not based on a national average, which brings me to the next point.

New York is at a serious disadvantage in this mathematical comparison because averages are notoriously inaccurate. As an example, take ten men, nine who are each earning one thousands dollars and one who is earning one million dollars. If you average their salaries it appears that nine are earning significantly higher salaries. That's what is happening with the national average for special education, it is deceiving. It inaccurately makes New York's percentage of children appear to be higher than "it should be." Here's something to think about, maybe the percentage should be higher because there is a real need in New York for special education services.

Did you know that there are three separate systems that parents must learn to negotiate their way through to get services for their children? There is an early intervention system, a preschool system and a school age system. Each of these systems has different rules and regulations with procedures that require parents to learn about complex meetings, evaluations and technical terms. It is to say the least, very stressful for parents, particularly for linguistically and culturally diverse parents. Interestingly enough, these are the families that often access the system late, sometimes very late. Often outreach programs do not reach enough diverse families. Putting notices in public libraries presents a significant barrier for parents who do not go to public libraries and/or do not speak English. Many families do not have a computer so they miss governmental websites that describe programs and services offered. Many families do not have primary health care providers.

It should not be surprising therefore that minorities who do not access early intervention services show up in larger numbers later on in elementary school. What does it mean? It means that there is a reasonable explanation why New York has a higher percentage of special education students in elementary school - because they are not being reached in the early intervention and preschool systems.

Finally, clinical research emphasizes a link between poverty and disability rates. Did you know that New York State State's poverty rate is above the national average?

Since the poverty rate is higher than the national average, why hasn't SED taken this factor into consideration? There has been an ongoing effort to reduce the percentage and number of children in special education without considering contributing factors. The justification has been that New York is above the national average. So what? How about the fact that these children need services?

When Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz comments that she's not in Kansas anymore, she's actually in New York. Kansas, New York, it's all the same to SED.