

## Horton Hatches the Egg

Many officials have a tendency to blame problems within public schools on the special education system. Special education costs too much is the first complaint. There are too many children in the special education system is the second complaint. Parents in the special education system manipulate the legal system to access private schools is the third complaint. Are they right? What are the real facts?

Firstly, we need to agree on the number and/or percentage of children in the special education system. Let's agree that approximately 10% of the public school population is classified to receive special education services. Where are these students? The overwhelming majority of students (98%) are receiving services within local public schools. So, only 2% of the special education population is attending nonpublic schools. How convenient to blame the 2% for the failure of the public school system for educating about 98% of the total student population.

Secondly, students are recommended out of the public school system because local schools admit that they cannot appropriately educate them. Would you want public schools to keep students when they cannot educate them? How would that benefit the 98% attending the same classes? The child with a disability who requires a small highly structured therapeutic learning environment is not going to benefit from a general education classroom with 25 typical peers and a regular education teacher. Look at the situation from the perspective of the typical students. The child with special needs may be disruptive, require the teacher's constant attention and/or change the instructional pace for the typical children in the room. Some students need separate and more intensive services.

Thirdly, what do you know about these nonpublic schools? Well, they are chartered by the Board of Regents and public funding only goes to those schools that are approved by the State Education Department. These schools are regulated and monitored by state and local administrative agencies. If the State Education Department decides that it will not reimburse a school for a physician on staff then the school bears the expense. If you compare teachers' salaries and benefits, the nonpublic schools are much more cost effective than the public schools because they are not unionized. Nonpublic school teachers unlike their public school colleagues are not treated comparably nor are they appreciated for their educational commitment to students with disabilities.

Let's end this discussion by comparing graduation rates. One would assume that since the public schools educate "normal" or typical students, the graduation rates in public schools would be higher. But are they? Typical students have a dropout rate of almost 40% in some schools. The number of low performing public schools has been increasing. If public schools cannot effectively educate typical students, would you like to venture a guess on how disabled children are doing? We come back to the fundamental question what would you do as the parent of a child with a disability?

One of my favorite childhood stories is “Horton Hatches the Egg” by Dr. Seuss. Horton the elephant sits on Mayzie bird’s egg with a dedication that is captured by the lines: “I meant what I said, and I said what I meant, an elephant’s faithful, one hundred percent.” These schools make a significant contribution to the public school system. As a final thought, consider whether typical students would be better served in the nonpublic schools as well.

Ellenmorris Tiegerman, Ph.D.  
Founder and Executive Director  
School for Language and Communication Development