Editor’s Note: Educators and schools require resources and training to address students’ special learning needs. This Spotlight examines major trends in special education including how schools can work to improve their instructional cultures, using brain research for students with disabilities, and the role of response to intervention.

INTERACTIVE CONTENTS:

1 RTI: An Approach on the March
4 Mind and Brain Research Trickles Into Special Ed. Classrooms
5 After Special Education, Students Turn to College
7 Mass. For-Profit Helps Schools Trim Special Education Costs
10 Training for Virtual Interaction
11 Keeping Special Ed in Proportion
14 When Speech Therapists Are Scarce, One-on-One Sessions Go Online
15 Rules Relaxed on Budget Cuts to Special Ed

COMMENTARY:
16 Where Are the Autism Teaching Competencies?
17 Bringing Professional Development Into the 21st Century

RTI: An Approach on the March

Response to intervention started out as a way to identify and teach struggling readers and special education students, but it’s fast becoming a way to change schooling for all students

By Christina A. Samuels

Response to intervention burst onto the national scene thanks to two major efforts by the federal government.

The $1 billion Reading First program ushered in with No Child Left Behind...
in 2002 gave a boost to the educational framework by encouraging schools to use it for their literacy programs.

Two years later, the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act said that states must permit districts to use RTI as one tool for determining if a child has a specific learning disability.

The process has been growing exponentially ever since, morphing along the way into new forms and educational uses.

In 2010, a survey of district administrators found that 61 percent had implemented an RTI educational framework or were in the process of spreading RTI throughout their districts. In 2007, that proportion was only about a quarter.

Response to intervention involves early identification of students’ learning problems and the use of focused lessons, or interventions, to address those problems before they became entrenched. Though primarily linked with special education and early reading, the method is now used at all levels of schooling and in a variety of subject areas. Educators use “tiered-intervention” models—of which RTI is one type—to improve school discipline. Response-to-intervention models have also been used to improve instruction for English-language learners, with preschoolers, and as a lever for districtwide reform.

The process has been credited as a factor in reducing the overall rate of students diagnosed with specific learning disabilities, which has been on a steady decline since 2005. And in a time of constrained resources, response-to-intervention materials are one of the few areas where school districts are increasing spending.

RTI “hasn’t changed special education,” Alexa E. Posny, the assistant secretary overseeing the U.S. Department of Education’s office of special education and rehabilitative services, told a group of researchers gathered in Washington for an RTI research summit last December. “It has changed education, and will continue to do so.”

The basic framework of a response-to-intervention process has coalesced around a few necessary parts. The approach typically begins with a program of “universal screening” that picks out students who may be struggling academically, usually with early reading skills.

When the student’s problem area has been identified, teachers use high-quality, research-based interventions with the student, while closely monitoring his or her response to those lessons. If the student’s skills pick up, he or she leaves the process. If there are still problems, the interventions intensify in frequency or length.

If a student still doesn’t respond to the most intensive intervention, he or she might then be referred for a comprehensive special education evaluation. In that way, using RTI as part of a disability-intervention process is different from the previous method that involved giving a student an IQ test, and then seeing if those results showed a discrepancy between the student’s intelligence and academic achievements. The “IQ discrepancy” model meant that students had to essentially fail in school for a long period before being deemed eligible for special education services.

Proponents of RTI say the process has changed education because of its focus on catching problems early, and on improving education for all students.

“RTI, writ large, is really about general education reform,” said Robert H. Pasternack, a former assistant secretary for special education and rehabilitative services, and now an official with Dallas-based Cambium Learning Group, which creates instructional materials. Mr. Pasternack was in office when President George W.

### THE EVOLUTION OF RTI

The basic “pyramid of interventions,” at left, became a well-known symbol of response to intervention because it gives a quick visual representation of how an RTI program can function in schools. Some depictions evolved to show how RTI fits in a model of academic as well as behavioral supports for students. Below, the National Center on Response to Intervention now promotes an even more complex visual model of RTI.

**Diagram:**

- **Tier 1:** Core instruction, school-wide behavior supports
- **Tier 2:** Academic interventions, behavior intervention for at-risk students
- **Tier 3:** Individualized instruction, intensive support

**Source:** “Foundations and Research on Identifying Model Responsiveness-to-Intervention Sites,” Learning Disability Quarterly, 2004

**Source:** “Response to Intervention: Policy Considerations and Implementation,” National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2005
Bush created the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education, which in 2001 pushed both for the use of RTI and for allowing states to use federal special education dollars for intervening early with students who were not yet identified as having a disability. Both recommendations ended up in the idea.

“We had a moral imperative to do things differently, and a fiscal imperative to do things differently,” Mr. Pasternack said, because too often, students were being told they had a disability when they were really victims of poor instruction.

Even with the intense and expanding interest and the investment of new money and other resources, the RTI process evokes questions.

The migration of RTI into new subjects, grade levels, and uses has come with little hard research to guide the way. At the same time, education schools are trying to figure out how—or whether—to introduce the concept to teachers-in-training.

Researchers are pondering whether RTI is being used carefully enough to yield valid results when it comes to identifying learning disabilities.

By the same token, some parents have complained that the process takes too long, and is not always implemented well enough to help their academically challenged children.

As the debate continues, RTI practitioners are forging ahead.

Donald Deshler, a professor of special education at the University of Kansas, in Lawrence, and a longtime researcher of student literacy, said the next step in RTI is for researchers to shift away from studying the nuts and bolts of how to implement the framework, and instead figure out just what elements make the process thrive in some schools and districts.

“There are some things that are embedded in RTI that make me hopeful,” Mr. Deshler added. For one, he said, “it begins and ends with instruction. RTI looks directly at student achievement in the most fundamental way.”

Many people talk about response to intervention as being a general education initiative, which leaves some wondering how special educators with their specialized training fit in. What is your day like now with students at your elementary school?

**ELIZABETH DOBRINEN**

special education teacher, Madison Elementary School, Sanger, Calif.:

**Q:**

A: “If RTI is done with fidelity, the strengths of both the general education and special education teachers stand out. Special education teachers have been trained to individualize to the need of students and find appropriate strategies that meet their needs. The lower tiers of the RTI model are where general teachers’ strengths are highlighted. They are trained to teach the grade level standards and to dig deeper into those standards effectively.

“It takes a lot of communication, collaboration and trust among my colleagues to pull off a schedule where the needs of the [special education] students are being met and the needs of the students that I may be serving in the intensive groups can be met as well. The goal of the schedule is to effectively meet the needs of all students.

“A great example of that this year is my one reading group that has 2nd- and 3rd-graders. The five students are grouped together based on all five having the same need. Two of the students are on an [individualized education program.] Two of the students are in the problem solving stage—the RTI team is asking, ‘Why are these two students not progressing as effectively as they should?’ So those two are receiving services from the intervention teacher and myself.

“The fifth student is in the bottom 5 percent of his grade level for reading. He needs strategic intervention to help him grow. Working together with the RTI team and grade-level teachers, all five students are receiving what they need to be successful.”
n a corner of a classroom here at the Ivymount School, a frustrated 7th grader tells himself to take a deep breath. Slowly, without distracting his classmates, he calms down.

This exercise is among many strategies derived from brain-science research that educators at this private school are using with students with disabilities. In this case, the technique is being taught to students with Asperger syndrome, for whom self-control in a moment of frustration can be elusive.

The five steps to regaining calm—including breathing deeply, reading directions, and telling oneself to give something a try—are taped to many of the desks of students in the Model Asperger Program.

Ivymount is one of a growing number of schools trying to adapt techniques based on brain research to special education settings, a practice that many teachers and parents may not have even envisioned a few years ago. While some educators remain skeptical, brain research is slowly migrating from the lab into the classroom, both in predicting which students may have learning difficulties and intervening to help students diagnosed with disabilities.

**Opportunities Emerge**

Among the efforts under way:

- In Cambridge, Mass., a Harvard University center is devoted to training those who want to use neuroscience and cognitive science to improve teaching, including for students with disabilities.
- In Washington, George Washington University has created a doctoral program in applied neuroscience in special education.
- The Center for Applied Technology, in Wakefield, Mass., employs specialists in neuropsychology, along with other experts, to expand learning opportunities for students with disabilities.
- A professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is using brain-imaging to predict which children in a given kindergarten class might eventually struggle with reading, because of dyslexia or other reasons, so intervention can take place as early as possible.
- “We are just beginning to understand how big this is,” said Maxine B. Freund, a professor in George Washington’s department of special education and the associate dean of research and external relations. “It’s an opportunity we treasure.”

That’s especially so for students with disabilities, said Kurt W. Fischer, a Harvard professor of psychology and human development and the founder of the graduate school of education’s Mind, Brain, and Education program.

“What we need to do is figure out how to harness those differences instead of making everyone learn the same way,” he said.

That doesn’t mean there shouldn’t still be some caution about translating brain research into educational techniques, he said.

“There are people that are skeptical, and they ought to be skeptical,” Mr. Fischer said. “There are lots of things happening,” he added, but “it’s still early.”

**Turning a Corner**

At MIT, neuroscientist and professor John D.E. Gabrieli has been working on using brain imaging to predict which students may eventually struggle with reading. He is clear about connecting his research with the classroom. One of his current projects involves working with about 20 Boston-area kindergarten classes in inner-city charter schools, suburban district-run schools, and Roman Catholic schools.

As many students as possible are brought to his lab for brain imaging—through the use of noninvasive functional magnetic-resonance imaging, or fMRIs—and the students get additional help based on the results. Mr. Gabrieli will follow the students for several years to see if the targeted interventions can stave off reading problems.

“How to diagnose and classify children—the more that we can make that scientific and less arbitrary, the better,” he said. “If something about the brain—the luck of the draw of their brain—is making reading extra hard for them, maybe we could just intervene early and spare them a lot of grief.”

**JOHN D.E. GABRIELI**

Neuroscientist and Professor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

If something about the brain—the luck of the draw of their brain—is making reading extra hard for them, maybe we could just intervene early and spare them a lot of grief.”

Typically, reading problems aren’t diagnosed until students are in 3rd or 4th grade. Not only do reading problems at that age hamper students’ ability to learn many subjects, they’ve lost hours of reading practice outside of school, essentially falling even further behind, Mr. Gabrieli said. Children who enjoy reading passively hone their skills by reading for pleasure, something poor readers are less likely to do.

One research-based product that already appears to be helping some students is based on existing practices in special education.

Using BrainWare Safari, software made by Learning Enhancement Corp., based in Chicago, students play what seems like a video game for 30 to 45 minutes a day, several times a week, for three months. The exercises build students’ memory skills, their visual- and auditory-processing skills, thinking abilities, and sensory integration, said Betsy Hill, the president and chief operating officer of Learning Enhancement. The program replicates the work of speech and language therapists, vision therapists, and psychologists, work that is tedious for both students and therapists.

Different exercises require students to click to a beat and deal with other distractions that can compete for what’s known as the working memory. Working memory allows students to do things like take notes at the same time the...
After Special Education, Students Turn to College

Postsecondary options expanding

By Nirvi Shah

When Andrew Van Cleave thought about what he wanted to do after high school, this son of two university graduates came up with the same answer many his age come up with: go to college.

Until the past decade, though, college wasn’t much of an option for students, including Mr. Van Cleave, who have significant intellectual impairments. This month, the 24-year-old, who has an intellectual disability and ADHD, became one of the first graduates of a two-year program at Vanderbilt University designed for students with severe cognitive disabilities. He starts a job next month.

Vanderbilt's Next Steps program is one of many created for this group of students in the last 10 years. The programs have grown in number from about 15 in 2002 to almost 170 now, as tracked by Think College, a Boston organization that does research about this new breed of programs and offers guidance about them for professionals, families, and students.

The growth is due in part to changes in federal law that have increased the expectations of such students in elementary and secondary school.

“We’ve had now 30 years of access for students with disabilities to go to school, and they’re coming out of that system with a different expectation: Their education should continue,” said Eric Latham, the executive director of Pathway, a college program for students with intellectual disabilities at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Earlier this year, a national study found that six years after high school, students with disabilities were less likely than peers...
to have attended any college—55 percent compared with 62 percent, though that includes students with all types of disabilities. Among people with intellectual disabilities, the rate of employment is just 9 percent.

The push for creating college opportunities for students with disabilities has also come from parents and advocacy groups, said Stephanie Lee, a senior policy adviser for the National Down Syndrome Society, based in New York. She is one of those parents: About 10 years ago, Ms. Lee’s daughter, Laura, who has Down syndrome, asked her mother if she would attend college at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania like her brother. When Ms. Lee researched what options her daughter had, she found “there was very little out there.”

The only real choices were for Laura to stay in high school until she was 21, which federal law allows some students with disabilities to do, or work in a sheltered environment for less than minimum wage, mostly with other people with disabilities.

Ms. Lee, who previously worked for the U.S. Department of Education’s office of special education programs, approached administrators at George Mason University, in Fairfax, Va., about creating a program for Laura and similar students. They said yes.

“I was very nervous about dropping my daughter off at this big university campus. It turned out better than I ever could have expected,” Ms. Lee said. The program, called Mason LIFE, or Learning Into Future Environments, now serves more than 40 students and has a vocational-internship option.

Successful Transition

As for Laura Lee, today she lives on her own and works at the World Bank, in Washington, two days a week, earning more than $12 an hour doing office work. She sometimes travels alone from the city’s Virginia suburbs on public transportation to get to her job.

“It is possible for young people with intellectual disabilities to transition into paid, competitive jobs,” Stephanie Lee said. “Post-secondary opportunities really give students an opportunity to get on a different path.”

Tammy Day, the director of Next Steps—the program at Vanderbilt, in Nashville, Tenn., where Andrew Van Cleave enrolled—said it allows students to attend university-level courses and work on vocational certificates. It also enables them to learn how to keep an apartment near campus—though the program doesn’t yet have a housing component—and spend hours a week with Vanderbilt students who don’t have such cognitive disabilities.

Ms. Day spent 10 years helping students with disabilities plan for life after high school but had concerns for students who chose to stay in high school.

“It’s a pretty rare school system that has found a way to make that plus-four years meaningful,” she said. “We found students regress. You’re 18, 19, 20, 21 and you’re around the 14- and 15-year-olds.”

In some ways, the Next Steps program is more rigorous than a traditional college student’s schedule, Ms. Day said. It requires students to exercise three hours a week, use university-issued netbooks to send email and keep journals, and take turns shopping and cooking for their peers—in addition to class work.

Enlisting State Support

When Donald Bailey rejected the idea of staying in high school past age 18, his father joined with other South Carolina families to form a small nonprofit group, the College Transition Connection, to create a college opportunity for his son. The younger Mr. Bailey has PDD-NOS, or pervasive developmental disorder—not otherwise specified, which is a disability on the autism spectrum.

Eventually, his father, Donald Bailey Sr., persuaded the state legislature to provide seed money to colleges that would establish post-high-school programs for students with cognitive disabilities; now, there are five separate options statewide, including one at the University of South Carolina, in Columbia, where Donald Bailey Jr. graduated in May.

His was a four-year program, though he finished it in three. The program involved living in an apartment, with roommates, 115 miles away from his parents.

The lessons he learned were invaluable, even those that didn’t directly deal with coursework.

“It took him a while to get used to getting up at the right time and get to class at the right time,” the elder Mr. Bailey said. “For an 8 a.m. class, at first, he would get up at 8 a.m.”

Now, at 23, the younger Donald Bailey lives on his own, works for Charleston’s parks and recreation department, drives, and reads to 1st graders once a week.

“Our goals with these programs are not unlike any other program or that of any other parent,” the senior Mr. Bailey said. “We wanted him to have the educational experience in college, be independent, [find] gainful employment.”

Federal Financing

Specific changes to federal laws have encouraged more schools to set up programs like those at George Mason, UCLA, and Vanderbilt, and have given students with intellectual disabilities more support to attend.

Provisions in the Higher Education Opportunity Act in 2008 permit students with such disabilities, who may not have high school diplomas, to get work-study jobs and receive financial aid, including Pell Grants. The law also authorizes money to create and study programs that could serve as models for other colleges and universities around the country.

Think College, the Boston-based group, is coordinating and studying 27 programs in 23 states that were awarded five-year grants by the federal Education Department and will recommend ways programs can be accredited and what kinds of certificates graduates should be awarded, said Debra Hart, the director of the education and transition team for the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

“We know from the first-year data that there’s immense variability regarding everything. This field has not had standards, guiding principles, none of that until recently,” she said.

Even so, some of the grantees, including the UCLA program, are already showing promise, according to program data.

The UCLA program has graduated 37 students in six years, said Mr. Latham, its executive director. Of those graduates, all but seven are employed, continuing their education, doing an intensive internship, or enrolled in a day program. All but three live apart from their parents.

Mr. Latham said students who enroll initially say their primary goal is to learn to live independently. They get that experience living in an apartment building near campus.

As they go through the program, Mr. Latham said, students’ goals shift to “How am I going to come out of here with a job?”

More federal legislation has been proposed to improve opportunities after high school for...
students with intellectual disabilities.

In November, U.S. Rep. Ander Crenshaw, R-Fla., introduced a bill that would allow families of people with disabilities to save for housing, education, and medical expenses using the same type of account, a 529 plan, that many families use to save for college. The bill, which has support in the Senate and among lawmakers from both parties, would also allow saving for expenses related to getting and keeping jobs, including job training and assistive technology.

Planning Ahead

Better planning from high school to work or school for students with disabilities could be required by the proposed TEAM act—as in Transition toward Excellence, Achievement, and Mobility—supported by Rep. Gregg Harper, R-Miss., whose son has Fragile X syndrome, a form of mental retardation. The laws would require schools to start working with students at age 14, as well as their families, on goals for life after school.

Although transition planning has long been required by federal law, “there’s no monitoring, no accountability,” said Barbara Trader, the executive director of TASH, formerly The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, in Washington. “The expectation for students leaving high school is ... that they will be college-ready. That expectation isn’t clear for students with intellectual disabilities.”

Recognizing the need to coordinate and link students with disabilities with information about their options after high school, the Washington-based HSC Foundation opened a center last month on the George Washington University campus, in Washington, devoted to just that. More than 40 health, education, and social-service organizations are now under one roof, and their information and meetings are available online to anyone in the country.

The transition from high school to college or work “is a challenge for everybody,” said Thomas Chapman, the foundation’s president and chief executive officer. “When you lay on top of that a physical, mental, or emotional challenge, you need a significant amount of expertise to address that properly.”

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Mass. For-Profit Helps Schools Trim Special Education Costs

By Nirvi Shah

In a prekindergarten class at the Webster School here, occupational-therapist assistant Ashley Tarentino leads five children in a round of “The Wheels on the Bus,” triggering the children with autism and other conditions that have affected their gross and fine motor skills to pedal their arms along with the actions in the song.

While this scene could be taking place anywhere in the country, one invisible factor sets this classroom apart. Ms. Tarentino doesn’t work for the school, or the district. She’s an employee of Futures Education, a private company that works with dozens of districts around the country on cutting special education costs.

Futures Education may be hired simply to evaluate how a district’s special education students are served, or it may go as far as providing therapists or aides and revamping how those services are delivered based on the company’s evaluation.

But despite many districts’ current financial straits, even having a conversation about changing special education services can raise the hackles of any school administrator, teacher, aide, therapist, or parent.

“It is a very hard discussion,” said Peter Bittel, the chief executive officer of the Springfield, Mass.-based Futures Education. “You have to gain a great deal of acceptance with the district that you’re working in.”

In some districts, the 13-year-old company has been greeted with an angry legion of parents and school employees protesting its arrival, or it has had to sue districts that wouldn’t pay for the analyses it was hired to produce. In other districts, however, including the Everett schools, where Ashley Tarentino works, the company has made few waves and saved the district significant expense.

“I don’t think anyone would know the difference,” said Thomas Stella, an assistant superintendent of the 6,275-student district about five miles north of Boston, referring to the services the company provides for the district. In two years, Futures has saved Everett about $620,000 in a total special education budget of about $16 million, with most of the reduction due to changes in staffing the company instituted.

Costs on the Rise

Around the country, most districts have found special education costs rising steadily for years, said John Musso, the executive director of the Association of School Business Officials International, in Reston, Va.

“Special ed always seems to be the tail that wags the dog,” he said. “We need to service those students, but the mandates just increase. The requirements increase. So, of course, the costs increase along with inflation.”

“I don’t think anybody disagrees with the basic tenet that these kids should be served,” Mr. Musso added, “but every school system has been in this position. They’ve had to subsidize the programs” because the federal requirement to provide a free, appropriate public education for children with disabilities is only partially funded.

He said that he wasn’t familiar with Futures Education, but noted that any company’s philosophy and practices would work only for some districts.

“It’s such an individual thing—who’s going to save and who’s not going to save,” he said.

But Futures believes many, if not most, districts are wasting money in the special education arena, money that, if saved and rerouted, could benefit the entire district, it argues.

The company says it has saved the 5,800-student Holyoke, Mass., district $1.6 million in three years. Savings of about $600,000 were reported by the 3,800-student Anson County, N.C., district. In Wayne County, Mich., district officials said savings have totaled more than $5 million in two years of contracting with Futures.

The problem, according to Mr. Bittel, is that
special education isn’t standardized from school to school, much less across districts and states.

Teams that craft individualized education programs, or IEPs, “are making individual decisions about students without any benchmarks,” he said, referring to the plans required under federal law for students with disabilities. “The question then for special ed is, what is best practice? Everybody can’t be practicing best practices.”

Mr. Bittel bases his conclusion on the company’s experiences with more than 100 school districts serving 30,000 individuals with disabilities in two dozen states. Some are small-city districts, such as Everett, but the company also has contracts to work with some students in the 60,000-student District of Columbia schools and 7,000 students in 17 districts in Michigan’s Wayne County.

Futures Education can analyze the way special education services are delivered in a district and provide some of those services, including therapists and paraprofessionals. The company usually offers to interview current district employees who hold those jobs, but the retirement and health benefits they’d receive from Futures are likely to be less generous, Mr. Bittel said.

The company stops short of taking over a district’s entire special education program, because it doesn’t employ teachers. Futures, which is privately held, declined to provide information about its profits.

Futures Education, whose headquarters are housed in what was once a convent, is trying to break the cycle of belief that providing more services for every child is automatically what is best, Mr. Bittel said. Its approach is to establish clear entry and exit criteria for when students are to be provided with a service.

“Speech therapy for life—you actually hear that a lot,” he said, referring to the perception that some students seem to never exit therapy, whether they need it or not. Another example he refers to often is providing therapy to teach children with disabilities how to tie their shoes.

“We’ll put a child in occupational therapy, sometimes for years,” he said. “Is that educationally relevant?” Instead, he said, the child could wear shoes that don’t need to be tied.

He has the same attitude toward working for years to improve the handwriting of a child with disabilities. “Are we hurting the child? We’d argue we aren’t,” he said of putting aside that effort.

Voicing Skepticism

But that approach bothers Luann Purcell, the executive director of the national Council of Administrators of Special Education, or CASE, based in Warner Robins, Ga. She was an assistant superintendent overseeing special education for 18 years before leading CASE.

“Just because the law doesn’t absolutely require you to use occupational therapy doesn’t mean sometimes you don’t do it,” Ms. Purcell said. In some cases, providing a service may help a school district avoid a due process hearing or lawsuit—and defending those legal actions could be more costly than providing the therapy, she said.

More importantly, she said, there’s always the possibility children will eventually gain skills when they remain in therapy. She recalled the case of a student with traumatic brain injury who ended up graduating with a regular diploma in her district, Houston County, Ga., because the district kept the student’s services in place for years.

“You can’t take business principles as such and just lay them over education,” Ms. Purcell said.

In April, SPEDWatch, a Pepperell, Mass., group that defines itself as a special education activism group, urged caution in weighing “recommendations made by Futures Education so as to avoid illegally denying children services.”

Futures’ approaches are similar, however, to those of a well-known nonprofit organization, Education Resource Strategies, in Watertown, Mass. ERS, in existence since 2004, works exclusively with large districts on ways to better manage time, people, and money.

In special education, said Stephen Frank, a director of the organization, the group looks at how many students are being identified, how they can be taught in less restrictive settings, and whether special education teachers can work with regular education teachers to reach more students at a time rather than pulling them out of class.

But ERS leaves it to districts to implement the plans it draws up, Mr. Frank said, while Futures takes on some of that work itself.

Company Origins

Some of the Futures strategies may sound extreme, but the company insists they are based on what’s in children’s—as well as school districts’—best interests.

Mr. Bittel, 63, the CEO, began his career in education as a speech therapist. Eventually, he joined forces with Erin Edwards, also a speech therapist, now the company president, and also now Mr. Bittel’s wife.

“We started out very much as a staffing company—physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech,” Ms. Edwards said. “It became clear to us, throwing more staff into a system was not helping.”

That realization started with one of Futures’ first contracts, around 1999. The Holliston, Mass., district considered hiring the company to provide speech therapists. But when Futures looked over the district’s workload and its therapists’ schedules, it turned out the dis-
district didn’t need more employees. It needed to redistribute the work and the way therapists worked with children—less one-on-one and more in groups, Ms. Edwards said. “The conversation has never been about denying services to kids or diluting their impact,” she said. “It’s looking at a delivery system and determining if there’s a wiser way.”

While part of the reason for the company’s push for more-inclusive education for students with disabilities is financial, it’s also motivated by what’s widely seen as educationally sound. A nationwide movement has pushed to teach students with disabilities more inclusively.

Another advantage: When the classroom teacher sees a therapist like Ms. Tarentino in action, he or she can mimic her, said Michael Neiman, a Futures vice president. And for the child, he said, the therapy is connected with a classroom lesson or activity, giving it meaning and context.

In addition, by working with a therapist in class, the child isn’t spending time out of class, away from general education classmates, Mr. Neiman said. Futures provides a minimum of five days of training for its employees each year to teach about inclusion and other topics, and school district employees get similar training, though amounts may vary.

The company also presses districts to use the strategy known as response to intervention: identifying students’ learning problems early, then using specific lessons, or interventions, to address those problems. Its use has reduced the number of students in many districts labeled as needing special education, and it is beneficial in other ways, said Carol Hepworth, the director of special education in Massachusetts’ Holyoke school district, which has been working with Futures for several years. “If you don’t have to test these 25 kids for special education, you can be over here doing instruction,” Ms. Hepworth said.

Futures Education signs contracts with districts in which the company pledges to take over services for a fixed amount that is less than whatever that district was paying for the same work.

“If we don’t meet that, we’re at risk for that,” Mr. Bittel said. In other words, there’s no going back to the district to ask for more money. The contracts also give districts the right to end the agreements within 30 to 60 days, with or without cause.

**Turnover Cited**

In the Lower Pioneer Valley Educational Collaborative in western Massachusetts, Executive Director Anne McKenzie brought in Futures during the 2008-09 school year. The company was hired after costs for providing services to the approximately 150 students with disabilities in the seven-district collaborative had increased yet again. “I am not somebody who is an unequivocating advocate of privatizing public education,” said Ms. McKenzie, who was a special education teacher earlier in her career. “We are primarily responsible for very high-quality educational services and high levels of student achievement and attainment. We’re also stewards of public money.”

Switching to Futures has helped trim $600,000 from the collaborative’s $20 million total annual budget.

The change meant nine therapist jobs were eliminated, and because most of the people in those jobs chose not to interview with Futures, new therapists came in.

Ms. McKenzie said that change remains one of the most difficult for teachers and parents to get used to, although parent complaints about services are uncommon. In the past, therapists hired by the collaborative were likely to have known a student for years.

Futures-hired labor has turned over more frequently, said Denise Murphy, a teacher in the area for 21 years who works with students with intense needs. Some of her students at Ludlow High in Ludlow, Mass., rarely speak, and others aren’t able to use the restroom on their own. She said the use of therapist assistants rather than full-fledged therapists is sometimes noticeable.

“Not everybody has a background in this,” she said, noting the special equipment in her room and the three students sitting silently in front of a television while several staff members watched them from across the room.

When allowed by local special education rules, Futures tries to use certified therapist assistants, such as Ms. Tarentino, rather than full-fledged therapists, which saves money. Mr. Bittel said that therapist assistants always work under the supervision of therapists, who are responsible for writing reports and evaluations. But for day-to-day therapy, except for some complex cases, it doesn’t make sense to use therapists, he agrees.

“A lot of therapy is routine,” he said. “You should use less-trained people to deal with routine tasks.”

With therapists shifting from school to school to work with as many students as possible, there isn’t time to plan lessons together or easily change a schedule to accommodate a school activity, such as a field trip, said Dot Rhodes, a 30-year special education teacher who also works at Ludlow.

For example, when a speech-language-pathology assistant worked with students on ordering a set of directions for planting seeds and teaching related vocabulary, Ms. Rhodes could have added some science principles to the lesson, she said. But she and the therapist didn’t have the opportunity to plan lessons together, as would have been the case in the past.

Mr. Bittel, whose own grown son has disabilities, said he understands that to some, his company will always be viewed skeptically. “We’re pariahs—outsiders who are going to come in and take jobs,” he said before the start of a May 3 school committee meeting in the Amesbury, Mass., district, which is considering hiring Futures or another firm to take over the work of paraprofessionals who work with students with disabilities. The move would save the 2,400-student district at least $110,000 a year.

“We’re not bad people. And we’ve never been asked to leave a district,” Mr. Bittel said. “Special ed is just not working. How do we rethink this? How do we do it differently?”
Training for Virtual Interaction

By Michelle R. Davis

Special education teachers who work with students in a virtual environment often need professional development that goes beyond traditional offerings to find tools and strategies that work without face to face communication.

For many online schools, that challenge means providing special education teachers with intense professional development, often weekly, to make sure they're meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

Such professional study usually takes place online, using Web-based conferencing tools and virtual classrooms, during a teacher's work day. The presentations—on everything from assistive technology to online individualized education programs, or IEPs—also can be recorded and accessed during a teacher's off hours.

But whether online or face-to-face, professional development is a critical component in supporting special education students in an online classroom, said Maurice E. Flurie, the chief executive officer of the 4,800-student Commonwealth Connections Academy, based in Harrisburg, Pa.

“In a brick-and-mortar school, student populations are more stable, and teachers have more time to determine what a student's gaps and learning needs might be,” Mr. Flurie said, referring to his sometimes-transient population of students. “In our environment, we need to be able to identify student needs sooner.”

Tailored Training

To start with, virtual special education teachers must have the same training that all new online teachers need, said Carrie McClain, the assistant director of special education for the 8,500-student Georgia Cyber Academy, in Atlanta. About 10 percent of the school's K-10 enrollment is categorized as special education students.

But special education teachers in a virtual setting need to go beyond what online teachers in general learn. They must be taught to conduct an IEP online, for example, to take advantage of all their communication tools, and to be aware of a wide range of assistive technologies and how best to incorporate them into an online curriculum. While parents can request in-person meetings and a school will comply, discussions often take place online or over the phone.

In professional-development sessions, Georgia Cyber Academy's special education teachers learn about the various applications that allow them to share an IEP document with other teachers and parents, how to change the instructional model of a class based on a student's needs, and how to create a behavior-intervention plan that fits into a virtual school, Ms. McClain said.

“A behavior intervention plan from a brick-and-mortar setting that says the student needs to work on keeping his hands to himself in the hall is no longer appropriate,” she said. “We need to make adjustments based on the change in the learning environment.”

Much of that professional development is done through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous web conferencing sessions for teachers, sometimes featuring experts and guest speakers. During the last school year, special education teachers at Georgia Cyber Academy received between 15 minutes and an hour of professional development per week, Ms. McClain said.

For special education teachers employed by Connections Academy, an online education company based in Baltimore that operates 23 virtual schools in 22 states, there are weekly professional-development opportunities as well, said Marjorie M. Rofel, the senior director of student services. Special education teachers new to teaching at Connections Academy receive two weeks of orientations that allow them to share an IEP with parents before a school will comply, discussions often take place online or over the phone.

“The university covers a variety of topics, including assistive technology and supplementary instructional programs, and helps teachers form an online cohort of colleagues to use as a sounding board, Ms. Rofel said. Connections Academy’s professional development for special education teachers typically takes place during the work day. Because of the way online teachers work, schools don’t have to shut down or find substitutes when teachers are in a professional-development session, Ms. Rofel said.

“They do it during their regular day, often around lunchtime, so they can sit at their desks,” she said. Since it takes place during their work hours, teachers do not receive additional salary or stipends for their professional development work, she said.

Year-Round Help

Special education teacher Kathryn P. Weaver said she gets year-round professional development at Commonwealth Connections Academy in Pennsylvania. The special education team meets weekly, in person, to discuss new policies and regulations. The school also provides themed topical training. During the past school year, it focused on how to support students’ transition from school to work, from school to higher education, and to independent living.

Because the school is virtual, there’s not much opportunity to provide hands-on job training for students with particular needs—for example, to teach a cooking class aimed at independent living, Ms. Weaver said. But the professional development she received got her thinking about what she could do to address the issue.

She was able to link students to local social services and job-training programs. She discovered methods of connecting students to college disability offices. The professional development also inspired Ms. Weaver to challenge her students to think about money management, how to calculate a tip,
and how to get around their communities on their own.

Ms. Weaver presented her 8th grade students with an activity that awarded them $200 in virtual money and asked them to plan a three-course dinner party for eight friends. Using a grocery store website, students calculated food costs and planned “upscale” parties, she said. The following week, she gave them the same challenge, but limited their budget to $50.

“A lot of students realized that here are their math skills at work in the real world,” she said.

For Cindi Madej, a special education consultant with the Columbiana County Educational Service Center, based in Lisbon, Ohio, the lens through which she views professional development is a bit different.

Her organization provides services to 11 school districts, and she seeks out professional learning opportunities for special education teachers who teach in a face-to-face environment but are looking for more online resources.

“School districts are having to meet accountability standards for students with disabilities,” Ms. Madej said, “and they’re having this frustration, for example, that a student with normal intelligence is not meeting the language requirements based on a linguistic” disability.

Districts are seeking out technologies that might help, such as software that might read text to a student. During the past school year, Ms. Madej brought in an expert who presented teachers with an array of technologies, including iPods, hand-held devices, and educational software and trained them on their use with special education students.

Teachers received in-person training on the technologies and had access to a website with shared resources. The teachers developed a plan to use the new technology and chose to focus on four students with learning disabilities. The teachers were also trained to collect and analyze data, Ms. Madej said.

The center plans to conduct similar professional development with special education teachers in other districts.

“Teachers were so eager to sign up this year based on feedback from teachers last year,” Ms. Madej said. “When they found some successes, they were spurred on by it.”

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**Keeping Special Ed in Proportion**

Experts say improvements in school instructional cultures can keep some struggling minority kids out of special education.

By Anthony Rebora

Everyone involved in education is aware of the issue of racial achievement gaps in standardized test scores. But for some advocates of educational equity, there’s a parallel trend that even more dramatically reflects schools’ difficulties in effectively teaching struggling minority students.

“Teachers were so eager to sign up this year based on feedback from teachers last year,” Ms. Madej said. “When they found some successes, they were spurred on by it.”

Interpretations of such figures vary. But for many school-equity experts, they point to the troubling conclusion that large numbers of struggling minority students are being classified for special education even though they don’t have true disabilities.

“The data are clear that when you look at the representation of minorities in special education, there’s something going on behind the scenes,” says H. Richard Milner IV, an associate professor of education at Vanderbilt University and the author of *Start Where You Are, But Don’t Stay There: Understanding Diversity, Opportunity Gaps, and Teaching in Today’s Classrooms.*

“In other words, there are kids who are placed in these programs because educators either don’t want to deal with them, don’t know how to deal with them, or don’t know how to be responsive to them.”

And placement in special education, researchers point out, can often make matters worse for these students. Divorced from the regular academic curriculum and environment, they tend to have poorer academic and career outcomes than their peers, including much higher school dropout rates. Compounding the problem is the enduring stigma that the special education label can have on students who don’t belong there. In the long run, says Milner, such students “become the victims of remediation.”

**What Schools Can Do**

Scholars generally don’t blame racial disproportionality in special education on outright discrimination. Instead, they say it typically derives from systemic flaws within a school or district’s instructional culture that allow for some disadvantaged students to fall through the cracks. Such problems are generally specific to individual school systems and may require a comprehensive analysis to identify. However, there are a number of widely recommended steps that school communities can take to address or prevent overrepresentation issues. By extension, these steps can be seen as ways to better support at-risk students in general.
Selected Books on Race and Education

To help teachers better understand the problems minority students face, school equity experts often advise forming faculty book-study groups around issues of racial identity and education. Here are some books recommended by the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at New York University’s Steinhardt School.

Building Racial and Cultural Competence in the Classroom
eds. Karen Manheim Teel and Jennifer E. Obidah (Teachers College, 2008)

Can We Talk About Race?: And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation
by Beverly Daniel Tatum (Beacon Press, 2007)

Culturally Responsive Teaching: Lesson Planning for Elementary and Middle Grades
by Jacqueline Irvine and Beverly Armento (McGraw Hill, 2001)

The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children
by Gloria Ladson-Billings (Jossey Bass, 1994)

Invisible No More: Understanding the Disenfranchisement of Latino Men and Boys
eds. Pedro Noguera, Aída Hurtado, and Edward Fergus (Routledge, 2011)

Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom
by Lisa Delpit (The New Press, 1993)

“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?”: A Psychologist Explains the Development of Racial Identity
by Beverly Daniel Tatum (Basic Books, 2003)

Open up the conversation. Rather than avoiding the issue or accepting it as “just the way things are,” schools facing a disproportionality problem should seek to foster honest—though tactful—discussions on issues of race, academic achievement, and pedagogy. Experts often suggest organizing meetings in cross-functional teams to explore educators’ own experiences and perspectives. “Get people to talk about who they are and their own views of things, and then to examine their practice and their curriculum,” says Elizabeth Kozleski, a professor at Arizona State University and a principal investigator with the Equity Alliance.

In these conversations, school leaders should be on the lookout for examples of subtle cultural biases that educators may be relying on to justify high rates of special education referrals for minority students, suggests Edward Fergus-Arcia, deputy director of New York University’s Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, which provides technical assistance to school districts on disproportionality. For example, some teachers may point to a lack of academic support from the students’ families or give voice to stereotypes about differing cultural expectations for student performance or behavior.

Such revelations may be a starting point for change. “The reality,” says Fergus-Arcia, “is that instruction should be responsive to all those types of issues.” For students with school-readiness problems, “it’s still our job to make sure we get them there,” he adds.

Become data-conscious. To help detect and address problematic racial academic patterns, experts stress the importance of honing in on student-performance data. “A lot of systems have disproportionality problems and don’t even know it because they’re not paying attention to the data,” says Amanda VanDerHeyden, an education consultant and researcher. “They are drowning in data but they don’t know how to consume it, pull it apart, then take action based on what they’re seeing.”

Janette Klingner, a professor of education at the University of Colorado and co-author of Why Are So Many Minority Students in Special Education?: Understanding Race & Disability in Schools, stresses the value of examining student data holistically. “Progress-monitoring data is great for looking at classroom performance as well as [that of] individual students,” she says. “You get a sense of whether a particular classroom is doing well or not doing well, and where you might need to give instructional support to the teachers.”

At the classroom level, meanwhile, access to well-parsed progress-monitoring data has been shown to help teachers make better decisions about special education referrals, says Claudia Rinaldi, a senior training and technical assistance associate with the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative in Newton, Mass. Hard data give teachers a solid basis for responding to students’ learning needs and gauging their development, she explains.

Heal the curriculum. Many school systems with disproportionality problems, even some affluent ones, “do not have curriculum frameworks that are well-articulated,” says Fergus-Arcia. The materials don’t have “a good scope and sequence and curriculum map that show the teachers what they could be doing and where they should be at different parts of the school year, given the standard they need to meet for the state.” Such inconsistencies need to be tackled, Fergus-Arcia explains, because they put kids who are struggling or disadvantaged at an even greater risk of falling behind.

In addition, school leaders may need to scrutinize the curriculum for areas that exclude or fail to resonate with particular subgroups of students. By way of example, Klingner points to math story problems that are remote from some kids’ experiences. To tap students’ full capacity, she says, curriculum needs to be “accepting, interesting, motivating to kids and to make connections between [academic content] and their lives.”

Tailor professional development. No matter how idealistic they may be, teachers are not always well-prepared to work with diverse-needs students. To minimize the potential for added referrals, experts advise, school leaders should ensure that teachers receive sustained training in high-frequency problem areas like classroom management, English-language learner instruction, literacy development, differentiation, and culturally responsive practice.

Fergus-Arcia also strongly recommends targeting intensive professional development to members of school instructional support or intervention teams—the “key gatekeepers,” as he calls them—to ensure that they are operating well even as regular classroom instructional problems are being addressed.

Intervene, early and often. Perhaps most crucially, schools detecting signs of disproportionality should introduce rigorous academic interventions, in the form of individual or small-group instruction,
to provide added support for students who are at risk of falling behind. Indeed, there is at least some isolated evidence that the response-to-intervention model—a tiered instructional-support framework—can significantly reduce special education referrals for minority students. But researcher VanDerHeyden stresses that, to work well, interventions must be carefully planned, based on validated instructional practices, and—most importantly—closely monitored through student-performance data. Even in schools with RTI, VanDerHeyden says, “intervention consistency is a huge problem.”

Fergus-Arcia adds that he generally urges schools to implement interventions earlier and more broadly than they are accustomed to. Too many schools, he says, take it for granted that their regular instructional program alone is strong enough to lift most kids.

The Teacher’s Role

While disproportionality is generally a school- or district-wide problem requiring structural change, there are also things individual classroom teachers can do on their own to respond to—or at least not contribute to—the problem. Teachers are not only the ones who work with the students most frequently and know them best. They also often initiate the special education referral process. “Teachers play a huge role [in special education determinations],” says Vanderbilt’s Milner. “Teachers matter.”

Don’t go it alone. Teachers who find that they are having trouble getting through to some students should acknowledge their own limits and reach out to colleagues for support. Getting input from others can help teachers avoid making fixed judgments about students that can lead to misclassifications.

Klingner advises observing the classrooms of more experienced teachers or partnering with staff members who have needed expertise. “Maybe it’s a special ed. teacher, maybe it’s an ESL teacher,” she says. “You’re going to develop a climate or culture where there’s more collaboration. That’s a really important piece.”

Similarly, Fergus-Arcia says teachers should make sure they know the proper protocols for getting assistance from the support or intervention teams in their building. “Every teacher needs some level of support, so having an understanding of that team, the existing process, and how it is activated is essential,” he says.

Be diligent about formative assessment. To ensure students are on pace, Fergus-Arcia recommends that teachers closely monitor progress data at least every two weeks. Those data may include not only test results but also written work, homework, and class projects. By consistently reviewing students’ work, teachers can gain an understanding of whether the kids are getting the material as intended, Fergus-Arcia says. Then they can “hone in on linking their teaching to the learning that’s actually happening,” as opposed to relegating some kids to permanent catch-up mode.

Discipline wisely. In responding to disciplinary problems—often a prominent factor in minority special education referrals—teachers should try to understand the motivation behind the behavior before punishing the student or removing him or her from class. “When a student is acting out, chances are something is happening beyond the behavior,” says Milner. “Students experience peer pressure, or they might be undergoing some family change or some form of abuse.” Educators should try to be cognizant of such issues and help students address them, Milner says.

As a rule, experts stress, teachers shouldn’t make assumptions about a student on the basis of behavioral issues. “We’re all responding from our own cultural frameworks of what we expect behaviors to look like in the classroom, and not every kid instinctively knows how to manage that,” Fergus-Arcia observes.

Read and reflect. In general, teachers in diverse classrooms may need to gain a better understanding of how their own viewpoints and preconceptions about schooling differ from those of their students. Teachers should be “conscious and deliberate about their own roles, their own belief systems, and how that sometimes connects inconsistently with their students,” says Milner. To help bridge cultural divides in the classroom, both Milner and Fergus-Arcia recommend forming faculty book-study groups around texts that speak to issues of education and ethnicity.

It’s important for teachers in diverse settings to converse with peers and “try to build an understanding of what it means” in practical terms to have kids with different cultural backgrounds and needs in their classrooms, says Fergus-Arcia.
When Speech Therapists Are Scarce, One-on-One Sessions Go Online

By Nirvi Shah

Reece Barnes meets with his speech therapist every week. He walks down the hallway at his rural Burney, Calif., school and chats with her one-on-one, even though she is four hours away in another part of the state.

Reece, who’s 8 and has a lisp, and his sister Alexis, 12, who has partial deafness in one ear, have communicated with their therapist entirely online since the 1,150-student Fall River Joint Unified School District changed the way it provides speech therapy. The California district joined other schools nationwide that are now employing sometimes hard-to-find therapists via live, interactive computer sessions.

The use of online speech therapy is growing, said Janet Brown, the director of health-care services in speech-language pathology for the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, or ASHA, based in Rockville, Md. The organization endorses online or teletherapy as long as the quality of the service is the same as for in-person therapy, said Deborah Dixon, the director of school services for ASHA.

Schools need to provide the right equipment, including computers with high-speed Internet access and webcams, and, in some cases, an aide or parent might have to supervise while the child is working with a therapist.

Demand Growing

Online forms of speech and language therapy are drawing interest now as the number of children requiring therapy grows, and as the role of the therapist has expanded beyond helping a child form words or correct a stutter or lisp. Still, more than a decade after the introduction of online therapy, students getting online speech lessons account for a sliver of the more than 1.1 million children ages 6 to 17 with a speech or language impediment.

At the same time, there aren’t enough people joining the profession to keep up with the demand for speech therapy. And, with school district budgets shredded by the economic downturn, the salaries offered to therapists may not be enough of a draw to lure them to the districts that need them, Ms. Dixon said.

Given those circumstances, the chance to work online, from home, may attract therapists who have retired or want to work part time.

In the 2,000-student Clinton-Massie district in southwest Ohio, some students began online therapy this month. Superintendent Michael Sander said the district is spending $18,750 on the services but saving $35,500, in part because it won’t have to spend money on recruiting or benefits.

The district will keep its two part-time therapists, but students who need more time with a therapist will be able to get it with the addition of therapy from specialists outside the district via computer.

The company they work with, San Francisco-based PresenceLearning, signs annual contracts with school districts that guarantee speech therapy for students at rates that reflect those in the region.

Teletherapy is seen as especially useful for remote and rural regions of the country, where districts have a hard time recruiting teachers and an even bigger struggle hiring speech therapists. When students work with therapists online, often with therapists located out of state, that challenge is resolved.

A case in point: Speech therapist Kristin Edwards of Winston-Salem, N.C., once spent her weeks working with children at nine different sites, which meant she spent a lot of time in her car. Now, she works from home, providing therapy for four hours straight each day to children at a pair of charter schools in El Centro, Calif.

Ms. Edwards, a therapist for 14 years, thought at first that online therapy would never work. After providing therapy online for two years, she said, she’s learned “there’s very little difference.”

An aide at the school steps in if Ms. Edwards needs the webcam moved or a child’s tongue adjusted with a tongue depressor.

Pluses and Minuses

One small study about teletherapy suggests it could be promising. A 2009 study of 34 children in rural Ohio, in which half the students used online speech therapy for four months while the others used traditional face-to-face therapy for four months, then switched, found that both groups’ progress was the same.

Satisfaction surveys found that the students and parents overwhelmingly preferred the online therapy. The study didn’t include any students with autism or severe cognitive disabilities, however.

The study, published in the Journal of Telemedicine and Telecare last year, concluded that videoconferencing seems to be a “promising method of delivering speech-language therapy to schoolchildren.”

So while other forms of technology schools use may be an experiment with unknown effects, this isn’t one of them, said Clay Whitehead, a co-founder PresenceLearning, which has been providing speech therapy online for about 2½ years, including in the Fall River Joint Unified and Clinton-Massie districts. The company works in about 15 states and provides speech therapy to about 1,000 children.

And many therapists who work with children online have found that students are more engaged than they are face to face because they enjoy working with computers, said Ms. Brown, of ASHA.

Online therapy does pose some complications. For one thing, therapists must be licensed both in the state where they work and the state where their students are located.

For another, the approach complicates efforts to integrate therapy into the classroom, with a therapist helping students with speech and language skills as they work on other lessons. After all, Ms. Dixon said, “the reason the speech-language pathologist is in the school is to help the child access the curriculum and provide supports and services to do that.”

Also, when therapists work with students in person and in the classroom, their teachers can follow the therapists’ example and work closely with them on coordinating the curriculum with therapy.

“We’re not working in silos any longer. We are collaborating and working together,” Ms.
Dixon said, “It’s difficult to do that” with online therapy.

‘A Long Way’

Speech therapists working online don’t just chat by video with their students.

The programs that PresenceLearning and online education provider Connections Education use are similar. One section of the screen shows images of the therapist and the student captured by webcams. On the rest of the screen, the therapist can play games with a student to work on a skill, whether it’s following directions or practicing a sound. Therapists can insert videos, worksheets, and other material into that space, and pupils move the computer mouse to circle an answer or interact with the game.

Robyn Guerrasio, the speech-services program manager for the Baltimore-based Connections Education, said therapists work on all the same skills they would if they were sitting with a child in a classroom.

Connections Education has provided therapy online for three years and now uses it with about 500 students, Ms. Guerrasio said.

Previously, the online school contracted with therapists where students lived, which required the therapist or a parent to drive somewhere. A missed session was sometimes difficult to reschedule, a problem that almost evaporates when therapy is provided online, Ms. Guerrasio said.

In a rural northeastern community outside Scranton, Pa., access to online speech therapy is a gift for Nancy DeTara, whose daughter Gianna takes classes through the Commonwealth Connections Academy.

Until Gianna started online speech therapy, Ms. DeTara drove up to an hour one way to connect with a speech therapist in person. The drive cut into Gianna’s schoolwork time, her mother said.

Now, Gianna meets with a therapist twice a week without leaving home. The 8-year-old is formally classified as having pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified, or PDD-NOS, an autism spectrum disorder. She works with her therapist on such skills as listening, following directions, grouping, sorting, and making conversation.

“She’s come a long way,” Ms. DeTara said.

Rules Relaxed on Budget Cuts to Special Ed

Advocates fear an erosion of students’ protection

By Nirvi Shah

New guidance from the U.S. Department of Education has put another chink in the once-solid armor protecting special education spending.

In the past, federal law was interpreted to mean that once a district set its special education budget, it could not be reduced permanently except for very specific reasons. The so-called maintenance-of-effort provision was built into special education spending rules to buffer students with disabilities from changes in services triggered by the ups and downs of public spending and politics.

One of the few exceptions to the maintenance-of-effort rule is when a district experiences an actual decrease in expenses, such as when an experienced, highly paid special education teacher retires or a high-needs student leaves a district. Cutting the special education budget for almost any other reason meant a district was running the risk of losing its share of federal funds.

But a letter to the National Association of State Directors of Special Education in June from the Education Department now says otherwise.

A district “is not obligated to expend at least the amount expended in the last fiscal year for which it met the maintenance-of-effort requirement. In other words, each year’s [district] maintenance-of-effort obligation is based on the actual amount expended in the immediate prior fiscal year,” wrote Melody Musgrove, the director of the office of special education programs.

That means that if districts lower their special education spending for any reason, whether or not it’s because of the exceptions built into the law, the Education Department says it’s now permissible to never resume spending at the previously higher level.

The shift has special education advocates worried.

“In essence, what the department has done by issuing this interpretation, they have created one more way in which [districts] can reduce their local spending, which is not articulated either in statute or regulation,” said Candace Cortiella, who runs the website IDEA Money Watch, which tracks special education spending.

Last month, Kathleen B. Boundy, a co-director of the Center for Law and Education, based in Boston, sent Ms. Musgrove and OSEP Deputy Director Ruth E. Ryder a letter challenging their new position about districts’ responsibilities regarding special education spending. Ms. Boundy asked that the guidance be rescinded.

“This is illogical and is not consistent with the language of the statute. This is not a matter of interpretation, but a misreading or misapplication of the law,” Ms. Boundy said. “Districts are required to maintain the level of special education expenditures from year to year based on a notion that costs rarely decrease, the population of eligible children is predictable, and Congress in granting ... funds for the education of children with disabilities mandated that these federal dollars were being used to pay for the excess costs of educating this vulnerable population of children, not as a substitute for local and state funding.”

Recession No Excuse

The Education Department said it is still reviewing Ms. Boundy’s letter. But, in an Aug. 29 email, federal education officials said they think school districts’ obligation to provide students with disabilities a free, appropriate education as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act will keep them from cutting spending haphazardly.

“We have some confidence that [districts] will continue to provide the funding needed to meet the ... obligation,” the email said. “Historically, because the cost of services has
increased, most [districts] have needed to provide at least as much funding as in the prior year to meet this obligation. It would not be appropriate for a [district] to reduce spending simply because of financially challenging times.’

However, the American Association of School Administrators, in Arlington, Va., estimates that 10 percent of the nation’s districts will not be able to keep special education spending level this year; and 15 percent won’t be able to do so next year.

“School administrators have been forced to cut to the bone when it comes to general education costs, but current IDEA [maintenance-of-effort] requirements prohibit them from making the same difficult cuts to special education,” said Sasha Pudelski, a legislative specialist for the AASA.

“Fairness dictates that all programs and populations share in the burden of cuts, rather than holding a single program exempt from the cuts,” she continued. “If the situation was reversed and special education budgets received all the cuts while general education students’ budgets were left entirely intact, parents and school leaders would never stand for that.”

Special education budgets haven’t gone entirely untouched. Seven states—Alabama, Iowa, Kansas, New Jersey, Oregon, South Carolina, and West Virginia—have requested permission to cut spending on students with disabilities, citing unforeseen declines in financial resources—an option that had never been used by any state. Some have been granted their wishes.

“You can only protect this pot of money so carefully for so long before people are going to be upset,” said Nancy Reider, the deputy executive director for governmental relations for the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, in Alexandria, Va. Bill East, the executive director of the group, wrote the February letter to Ms. Musgrove that triggered the Education Department’s informal guidance on reducing special education spending.

“At the same time,” added Ms. Reider. “I don’t want services for kids to be cut.”

Part of the solution is more federal funds for special education, said Lindsay Jones, the senior director of policy and advocacy services for the Council for Exceptional Children, in Arlington, Va.

“CEC has long advocated for full funding for IDEA,” Ms. Jones said. When the law was crafted, it allowed the federal government to contribute up to 40 percent of the cost of educating students with disabilities. The current contribution is 16.5 percent. Members of Congress have proposed bills to increase the share of federal spending on students with disabilities, but none has passed.

“Everybody is taking a magnifying glass to their budgets,” Ms. Jones said. “But at the end of the day, these are individual services and there are lots of individualized needs for technology that are expensive.”

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**COMMENTARY**

Where Are the Autism Teaching Competencies?

By Emaley McCulloch and Janet Martin

States are no strangers to classroom standards. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law in 2002, the federal government required states to create teacher standards and place highly qualified teachers in every classroom.

Nearly a decade later, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State Schools Officers spearheaded the initiative to create common-core standards to “allow teachers to be better equipped to know exactly what they need to help students learn and establish individualized benchmarks for them.” Today, all but four states have adopted the common standards to improve math and English/language arts skills.

We like both initiatives. Setting the bar high is a good thing for all involved. We are, however, disappointed to see so few standards set for teaching competencies for those working in special education classrooms, and, more specifically, for those teaching children on the autism spectrum. In 2010, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that an average of one in 110 children in the United States has an autism spectrum disorder. According to the group Autism Speaks, government figures also estimate autism diagnoses are increasing 10 percent to 17 percent annually.

Even with these alarming numbers, only a handful of states have adopted autism competencies that provide training for educators. We believe the need for standardized competencies is urgent.

Here’s why:

There is agreement among experts in the field of autism that the sooner a student gets appropriate treatment, the more likely it is he or she will be able to mainstream into a typical classroom. This option could also mean cost savings for districts by placing more students in a typical classroom sooner. The Special Education Expenditure Project, conducted for the U.S. Department of Education in 2003, reported that students with disabilities can have expenditures as high as $20,095 per year—3.1 times higher than a regular education student. The key phrase here is that the student receives “appropriate treatment.”

Evidence-based autism interventions, also known as applied behavior analysis, build the behavior and social foundation needed to learn academics and pass state-mandated standardized tests. Yes, children with disabilities must participate in state tests as outlined within the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the law currently known as No Child Left Behind. Until these children can control problem behavior and build functional language, they will not be able to learn basic math, science, or language arts.

Unfortunately, there is a severe shortage of qualified teachers to support students on the autism spectrum.

In the “National Assessment of IDEA Overview,” published in July by the Institute of Education Sciences, 46 percent of school districts reported that they could not find qualified special education teachers to work with students with autism. Fifty-four percent of districts also reported difficulty in finding qualified special education teachers to teach children with severe behavioral disorders—a common characteristic of autism.

How can states implement autism competencies for teachers?

The first step is to identify evidence-based autism-teaching procedures. The
National Autism Center is a good starting point. It published the National Standards Project in 2010. Within this document, the center outlines 11 established autism interventions, including naturalistic teaching, modeling, pivotal response treatment, and behavior management—all methods of applied behavior analysis.

The second step is to properly train teachers and support staff to implement these autism interventions with fidelity. According to the National Assessment of IDEA, districts continue to utilize university coursework, alternative certification, and professional development to increase the number of qualified special education teachers. These are positive steps, but we feel they alone are not adequate.

Two states—Virginia and California—have created successful autism teacher competencies and training. Districts and schools that are interested in pursuing state autism competencies should look no further for ideas.

Virginia, which developed state competencies in partnership with the Virginia Autism Council, also created the Autism State-Directed Project, a voluntary measure to ensure teachers across the state received proper training in these evidence-based autism teaching strategies.

California also deserves mention. Not only is the state requiring all new teachers to take courses during college in evidenced-based autism teaching strategies, it also is requiring more than 25,000 veteran special education teachers to obtain autism training through local universities. If these courses were not completed by this past July, the educators would not be allowed to teach children with autism.

Our own organization, Autism Training Solutions, trained more than 1,000 educators in 20 states last year in applied behavior analysis, and conducted surveys with special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff in California, Florida, Hawaii, Utah, and Virginia. Overall, we found that these educators are seeking help. Autism-related training is not another hindrance in their already all-too-busy day. A survey conducted with educators in Virginia found that almost 90 percent of teachers recommended that their schools continue to utilize autism training.

Autism is not going away. Let’s work together to create autism teacher competencies and train teachers to apply these strategies inside the special education classroom. Nothing is going to change if we accept the status quo.

Emaley McCulloch is the co-founder of Autism Training Solutions, based in Honolulu, and a behavior analyst with 15 years of experience in the field of autism and education. Janet Martin is a strategist at Autism Training Solutions and works directly with service providers, schools, and universities to implement standardized autism training for professionals.

## Commentary

### Social Skills Are Critical for Those With Disabilities

By Sandra Houghton

I imagine a childhood without play dates or birthday parties, sleepovers or school dances. Doesn’t sound like much of a childhood, does it? Well, for children with disabilities—developmental and otherwise—it is, more often than not, the norm.

Having grown up with cerebral palsy, I know what it feels like to be “different.” Even within my own family I felt like an outcast. My brother could do no wrong. My little sister had the looks and the brains. But I was just the disabled kid. I didn’t have the opportunities that my siblings had. I had no friends, no social experiences.

During my school years, I was a target for bullies; ridiculed for the way I talked, the way I walked, and even the way I dressed. On top of that, I had no support system. Sure, I had my fair share of sympathetic teachers, but on the whole, there were no systems in place to help me. I graduated at the bottom of my class and struggled as a young adult to find meaning and purpose in my life. Unfortunately, my story is no different from that of most students with developmental disabilities.

I got lucky when I connected with people from the Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council, or MDDC, who helped me find an identity and purpose. It was a long and often painful road, but I am a better and happier person having gone down it. What I learned was this: The skills that were most important for me to grow didn’t come from a textbook or a classroom; they came through developing what professionals today refer to as “soft skills” or social skills.”

The skills that were most important for me to grow didn’t come from a textbook or a classroom; they came through developing what professionals today refer to as “soft skills” or social skills.”
stand up for myself. In 2000-01, I received a Gopen Fellowship, which provides mentoring and financial support for someone with a developmental disability, or a family member, to work in the disability-advocacy field to empower others like me to be agents of change. As a fellow, I developed the leadership course I now teach at MDDC.

My leadership series at MDDC provides an interactive learning environment that focuses on the person, teaching individuals about themselves, their strengths, and their abilities. We introduce different ways that people communicate, the way our body language speaks to people, and how attitudes and feelings influence our behavior toward others. We teach students how to work together, how to dress for success, and how to be part of a team. Ultimately, the program works to improve a person’s self-esteem, increase confidence to try new things, and develop the soft skills needed to succeed.

I struggled to get where I am today, and it pains me to see that young people are still struggling decades later. Understanding who you are as a person and how to make a good impression on others is necessary for success in life.

School is tough—and it’s even worse for children with disabilities, who are too often alienated from their peers and made easy targets for bullies. By sticking up for children with disabilities and fostering inclusive environments in our schools, we can dispel the indifference that shelters bullying.

As a society, we must invest time and effort to develop and expand support systems and training programs similar to those at MDDC for students and young adults transitioning out of the education system. Focusing on soft skills will enhance opportunities for students and young adults with disabilities to improve their social skills, increase their self-confidence, and lead more productive lives.

No one should feel left out.

Sandra Houghton is a self-advocate for human rights and public services for individuals with developmental disabilities. She developed the Self-Advocacy Leadership Series, or SALS, which is the first long-term program in the United States to teach individuals with developmental disabilities to become “self-advocates” through improving communication and social skills. Ms. Houghton conducts SALS training seminars at the Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council, in Quincy, Mass.
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