



Untangling the Special Ed Knot

A look at three districts that have found answers on how to better identify students with disabilities and offer remedial help when it's needed.

By Wayne D'Orio

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One of the toughest decisions educators have to make is also one of the first they confront each new school year. Faced with children who are behind grade level in at least one curriculum area, teachers and principals must tackle the daunting task of deciding whether each child has a learning disability and should be referred to the special education world of individualized education programs (IEPs), regulations and parent conferences, or whether the child simply needs remedial help.

There's plenty of evidence that despite school officials' best intentions, they don't always master this tricky decision. Experts have long held that minorities, especially males, are too often put in special education just because they are not up to grade level. A 2003 federal report by the Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs validated this criticism when it showed that among students with disabilities, a higher percentage of black students were labeled with mental retardation or emotional disturbance than non-black students in the same group.

If you need more proof of the identification problem, look at the numbers from the National Center for Education Statistics. In the 1990-91 school year, there were 4.7 million students in public schools served under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Just 11 years later that figure has risen to 6.4 million, or 13.4 percent of all students enrolled in public schools. That's a 34.6 percent increase in students' aged three to 21 who are served under IDEA.

While a misclassification can be devastating to a student and take years to make right, districts pay a steep price as well. With the average per-student cost pegged at \$8,044 by the National Center for Education Statistics (for the 2002-03 school year), each special education student costs a district approximately \$18,500, using the standard measurement that each special education student costs 2.3 times an average student.

But a recent change in the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act aims to help schools do a better job making this decision. This provision allows schools to spend 15 percent of their federal IDEA money for “early intervening” services, basically allowing the schools to pay for extra services for students before deciding whether those students will be referred to special education. Schools that have an overrepresentation of minority students in special education must use 15 percent of their IDEA money this way. The rules apply for all students, but are encouraged especially for K-3 students.

Starting Early

While the federal rule change involving how schools can spend IDEA money was new this fall, some schools have already been doing what is suggested, and reaping the benefits. In three different districts throughout the country, programs put in place to serve students with learning differences are not only reducing placements, but also helping children learn more, whether they end up in special education or not. The common thread? Managed, adaptive courseware systems, a fixture in thousands of mainstream classrooms across the country, but only recently recognized for their success with pre-referral intervention. A managed adaptive courseware system is combination of management system, assessment, and curriculum resources to provide administrators, teachers, and students with tools to improve academic performance.

Julian Elementary School in Julian, Calif., uses an [adaptive courseware system](#) for its 400 K-8 students. Superintendent Kevin Ogden found this program works especially well for students who are below grade level in math.

At Reynoldsburg Junior High School in Reynoldsburg, Ohio, an adaptive courseware system is also used for all students' math work. But Intervention Specialist Kelly Wood found that the program worked well for both students served by special education and students in need of remediation.

At rural Anderson Elementary School in Cheyenne, Wyo., students started working on their courseware system before a special education designation was made. While all students showed progress, some were brought up to grade level, lessening the number of costly special education referrals made later. A few of the students with disabilities showed enough progress on the program to be placed back in general education.

Since many students are referred to special education in second or third grade, the need for early intervention is enormous. Because scientifically-based digital learning solutions are so widely used in schools throughout the country, this tool might exist down the hall from your classroom. While adaptive courseware systems were designed to serve the broader at-risk student population, a growing number of schools are finding that their pinpoint accuracy on student weaknesses with suggested extra work and solutions is a perfect fit for their students with disabilities.

California Learning

At Julian Elementary, Ogden says the tool is used by all K-8 students. Because the superintendent says his district “tries to exhaust all we can before we test students for

special education,” the district offers the courseware system in math to all students. “We also screen kids for reading problems and offer support services for both students and their families,” he says.

While Ogden has found the program helpful for gifted students because it allows them to continue to build skills past their grade level, its work among students below grade level is what impresses him the most.

In the three years Julian has used the program, Ogden says test scores among this group have increased and “students that didn’t feel successful in math have a much more positive attitude in math” because of their progress. “One special education student with autistic tendencies last year made two years worth of growth in just one school year,” he adds.

Students use the program at least 15 minutes a day, and while Ogden admits that might not sound like a lot, it has an impact. “If we use it 15 minutes a day for just 165 of our school days, that’s 41 hours. It’s reasonable for a teacher to be able to make that time for this group of students,” he says.

Moving Forward in Wyoming

Unlike Julian, Anderson Elementary brought its courseware system in specifically to help students with reading disabilities. “In just a few years, our students showed remarkable improvement,” says Kathy Hauswirth, the recently retired intermediate resource room teacher at the school. “Three of them actually left special services altogether,” she reports.

Anderson takes its at-risk students and has them use the program 15 minutes daily. “I pull weekly reports,” says Debbie Nelson, the primary resource room teacher at the school. “If they are having difficulty in a specific area, the program will indicate it. I go and pull additional support materials and give them to the teacher or work with the student individually.”

While Nelson says she is still collecting data on the school's use of their system, she has seen growth from the 55 students using the program. “Some didn’t make the significant growth we wanted, so we went ahead and did special education assessments. But by the time some of these kids hit grades four through six, their skills had been remediated.”

“Students can see the growth they make,” Nelson adds. “That is so powerful. I had one student who made three grade levels in a year.” The specific reports also allow her to see how long students are logged on and alert her to any teachers who aren’t making time for the computer-based work.

Out of 470 students in the school, about 40 are served through special education and another 15 are below grade level, she says. One unexpected benefit of the program was that because these students were used to using a computer, they were prepared when Wyoming recently changed its state assessment to require a computer test.

Ohio's Proof Positive

Reynoldsburg Junior High uses its adaptive system to help teach math for all its students, but Intervention Specialist Kelly Wood tracked how students with learning disabilities performed after using the program for at least 80 minutes per week. Of the 18 students tracked over two years, 78 percent were able to move into regular education classes. An additional 28 students were tracked for one year, and Wood found that almost every member of this group — 88 percent — made at least one year of growth.

“Student learning has become stronger because the system actively engages students in learning activities, promotes competency, and focuses on effective instructional principles and achievement,” Wood wrote in a study she completed for a college journal. “Providing individualized, engaging, technology-based instruction to students proves successful on two fronts. First, it certainly demonstrates to the student learner that success and achievement are possible; second, it gives the classroom instructor the means to engage students while targeting necessary skills.”

Wayne D’Orio is a Connecticut-based journalist who has written extensively about K-12 education issues. He was most recently the editor in chief of District Administration magazine.

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