

An overhaul for special education in California? Experts say 'yes'

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Using an iPad and a smart board, [Lincoln Elementary](#) teacher Zach Smith is whirring through colorful videos his students pieced together on their tablets.

First up: Eight-year-old Connor Sullivan's mash-up of a green five-armed monster dancing outside San Francisco's Alamo Square. Nine-year-old Rosemary Jimenez's video is next, this one with a dragon, knight and princess outside a castle. The students use an iPad app called Toontastic to create the collage-like minivideos.

The kids get a kick out of it. Connor is bouncing about when his video pops up on the big screen, and Smith asks if the monster is the good or the bad character. The class is learning about the concepts of characters, plot and setting.

It's a routine the Sanger Unified special education teacher uses throughout the day to show off his students' good work. The class is a mix of third-, fourth- and fifth-graders with special needs who each spend a portion of the school day with Smith. Depending on their strengths, the youngsters will also spend time in general math, English, science or social studies.

Smith heads to a fifth grade room where two of his students, plus a class of general education kids, are learning to multiply fractions. The pair, Brayan Barrios and Derek Murrietta, have minds for math.

"My goal in successful mainstreaming is to be able to have a person walk in and not really see where (my special education) kids are at," he says.

If that's his goal, Smith is certainly achieving it. Both Brayan and Derek whip through the task fifth grade teacher Lydia Leal writes on the board.

In Sanger, only one category of education exists. Instead of "special education" and "general education," all students are taught to their strengths and weaknesses.

This seamless succession of learning, personally crafted for each of Smith's students, has become the model of what education should look like, say California's top education leaders.

But those leaders, like State Board of Education head Michael Kirst, say too few schools look like Lincoln.

When you boil it all down, it's discrimination ... In some respects, people with disabilities represent the last civil rights movement. They're not looked at as equals, they're not really welcomed in our society as much as they should be.

Joe Bowling, manager of the Sequoia Regional Office of the State Council on Developmental Disabilities

Too many students are kept separate in "special day classes," fail to get the skills they need to function in society and are greeted with low expectations by teachers and administrators. Parents often aren't knowledgeable about their children's rights. Few teachers are trained in both special education and general education. And the way special education is funded is out of date and unequal between school districts.

It's time for an overhaul, Kirst says.

A dream of a single system

In the United States, the [treatment of children with special needs](#) has a grim record. In the past disabled children offer

were sent to state-run institutions with little hope of rehabilitation or education. Parents had little say about the services their children received. If children were allowed to attend their neighborhood school, their abilities were rarely evaluated.

That all changed in 1975 with the passage of a [federal law](#) that gave all disabled children the right to the same type of free and public education all other children received.

The picture of special education today is vastly different. Federal law requires California's approximately 705,000 disabled children to each have personalized education plans that account for their abilities and goals. Teacher training programs include certification programs for aspiring special education teachers. Parents have legal channels if schools fail to give their children what they need.

But how well is it all working?

Kirst says "not very."

Many students get stuck in classrooms with little or no time spent with their non-disabled classmates. Few graduate from high school and enter higher education programs.

"We just seem stuck with what we have, and there was no momentum to really move forward," Kirst said.

Local special education advocates agree. Joe Bowling, manager of the Sequoia Regional Office of the [State Council on Developmental Disabilities](#), said many schools still resist including disabled students in general education classes.

"When you boil it all down, it's discrimination," he said. "In some respects, people with disabilities represent the last civil rights movement. They're not looked at as equals, they're not really welcomed in our society as much as they should be."

It was these types of failures that motivated a lineup of the state's top education experts to find out how to fix what is going wrong. In March, the group of policy, K-12 and university leaders released an 83-page report called "[One System: Reforming Education to Serve All Students](#)" with a laundry list of recommended changes.

Among them: Children with special needs should be identified early and given the services they need. Teacher preparation programs should be reformed so both special education and general education teachers can easily work together to serve disabled students. All students should be held to high achievement standards.

What this would achieve, the report said, is an education system that is singular in its mission: To educate all children to their highest potential and help them succeed as complete members of society.

An uphill battle

What will it take to achieve this dream?

For parents like Teri Graham, it's a vision that is unimaginably far off.

Graham has sent her 13-year-old son Gianni Graham-Contreras, who has autism, to three different schools in as many years. Gianni was doing well at Figarden Elementary in Fresno until third grade, when he began having trouble with reading comprehension. He was held back that year, and in fourth grade his progress took a turn for the worse.

This was a boy who once excelled over his non-disabled friends at school, Graham said.

At the end of that school year, Gianni's school psychologist told Graham her son had an additional intellectual disability.

"He's really not going to learn," Graham remembers being told.

From then on, she was constantly fighting to get Gianni what he needed, like a classroom aide and someone to walk him from class to class.

Discouraged, Graham moved into Clovis Unified School District, and then to Central Unified. It's an ongoing battle to keep Gianni from being placed in a special day classroom reserved for special needs children.

"He knows he has autism, but he doesn't really realize he has a disability," she said. "I don't want him in a classroom (with only special education students) where he's going to be shut down...He picks up bad habits, he's not challenged."

There are other serious challenges to overcome, like locking students into a lifetime of being labeled "special education" even if they're not truly disabled. That includes youngsters who have trouble reading or have attention or emotional issues.

Mildred Browne, an education consultant and a commissioner on California's Advisory Commission on Special Education, said this happens more often to students of color: state statistics show black and Hispanic students are categorized as disabled at significantly higher rates than white students.

Once students are "identified for special education, they very seldom get out of special education," she said. "It becomes a life sentence."

A sentence that is especially troublesome, considering the consequences that are tied to some disabilities, like emotional disturbance.

"They cannot serve in the military or get certain jobs," Browne said. "It can be very subjective and purely based on the student's behavior."

Alice Parker, national director of special education for Maryland-based Cross & Jofus education consultants, said it will be a challenge to convince educators they need to do more than simply meet the letter of special education law.

Parker was an assistant superintendent and director of special education for the California Department of Education for nearly a decade. She said the system needs to "refocus so we're not looking only at their civil rights, but also, how do we do a better job and teach kids to a higher level?"

A new way of teaching

Changing the way educators think about special education is a logical first step.

The "One System" report authors found there often is a disconnect between teachers who instruct general education classes and those who focus on special education.

Dana Powell, who has worked as a special education professor at California State University, Fresno for 20 years, said teacher preparation programs are an important place to begin reform.

For a long time, she said, many teachers thought, "Those are your kids, and I don't need to teach your kids. I didn't get a credential to teach your kids."

Those views are changing, she said. But it's still a numbers game: While there are too few people going into teaching in general these days, even fewer decide to get a general and special education teaching credential.

"I wish that they had gone a little bit further in the ("One System") report and just said that everybody is going to have a dual credential," Powell said. "If general education teachers don't have a background and understanding of what the disabilities are, and they don't have the training in modifying and adapting instruction, they're not likely to do that."

At Selma High School, young aspiring teachers are getting early lessons in this type of training.

Under the supervision of special education teacher Chad Wenter, non-disabled students go to class and work on assignments with their fellow high schoolers who have special needs. Some of Wenter's "peer tutors," like 16-year-old Raul Quijada, hope to someday become special education teachers.

Each day a group of 20 or so non-disabled teens spend a few hours with Wenter's students, many who have Down syndrome and other developmental delays. In choir class, senior Carmela Acosta sings alongside special needs students Jennifer Reyes and Alyssa Duarte.

On the other side of campus, Raul is running around the gym with four bright-eyed young men in physical education class. Music blaring, Raul works up a sweat as he and three of the boys jump rope. Raul then pushes a fourth, "DJ" Robert Jimenez — who earned the nickname for knowing all the words to lots of pop classics — around in his wheelchair.

He learns just as much from his classmates as they're learning from him, Raul says.

Wenter says tutors like Raul are ambassadors for his special needs students.

"Taking the students out to those classes helps break down barriers and walls and assumptions that the rest of the kids on the campus and the rest of the staff might have about my kids...as they become friends and, like I said, family they're able to take that experience out to the rest of the campus."

A funding conundrum

The dream of one system of education for all students could carry some hefty costs in the short-term: reforming teacher credentialing programs could be expensive for universities or the students who attend them. Raising student achievement and figuring how to better integrate students takes time and money, too.

And special education is already an enormous expense. On average, it costs more than twice as much to educate a student with special needs compared to a general education student, a [2013 Legislative Analyst's Office report shows](#).

The way that money makes it into the classroom is a result of decades worth of state and federal legislation. Small tweaks layered here and there create a mind-bending system of money streams.

On the federal side, the original Individuals with Disability Education Act promised to chip in 40% of the extra costs it takes to educate special needs students. Federal funding never comes close to that, however: according to the "One System" report, only 11.5% of California special education funding is federal.

States and local districts make up the difference.

In Fresno Unified, for example, 38% of the district's \$103.3 million special education budget in 2014-15 was paid out of the district's general budget. Of the district's entire budget for that school year, 14% went for special education, spokesman Jedidiah Chernabaeff said.

8.2%

The percent of students in Fresno County diagnosed with autism in 2014

Local education officials say school districts are saddled with higher payments as more students are diagnosed with disabilities. The number of students with emotional disturbance or intellectual disabilities has gradually increased in Fresno County over the past decade, [state data shows](#). Rates of autism have spiked, jumping from 1.5% to 8.2% of students diagnosed between 2004 and 2014.

Steve Ward, legislative analyst for Clovis Unified, said districts struggle to keep up with costs as more students are diagnosed.

“A child with autism, we will have them from infancy to age 22, and unfortunately they’re going to need services from a school district for 22 years. That’s frustrating to the districts,” he said. “We want to support those children, we can provide the best services to meet their needs, but it’s expensive.”

A special day class for eight elementary age children with autism could cost as much as \$318,400 a year, Ward said. The money pays for the teacher, a speech specialist, a psychologist and assistants.

The “one system” idea could be one answer to such costs, State Board of Education President Kirst said.

While planning for reforms — like how to integrate more special needs children into general classes — might be costly upfront, over time “we could actually save some money,” he said. With fewer high-needs students in separate “special day” classes, districts could begin chipping away at high costs.

More vital than that, he said, is to get away from a system that “checks off boxes about services.”

Or as Bowling, the Council on Developmental Disabilities regional manager, puts it, to fix decades of wrongs against the most vulnerable.

“You start your day and you end your day in a regular classroom with your non-disabled peer group. If your name is Bowling, you’re on the roster alphabetically. You’re a member of that classroom.”

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