



DC's SPECIAL EDUCATION MUST STOP BEING SO SPECIAL



Position Paper III

The town is all up in arms that 4% of DCPS students eat up 15% of the school budget. Obscured in the fiscal drama of runaway costs for adjudicating, enrolling, and transporting students consigned to “special education” is the likely misuse of that designation by teachers to merely dispose of difficult (“non-submissive,” “uncooperative,” “non-conventional”) students. Then there’s the nettlesome puzzle of why DC has a volume of special ed administrative hearings estimated to be greater than the rest of the entire nation combined under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), more in one month than California holds in a year.

The answers to these troublesome questions lie in DC’s arcane bureaucratic structures, its penchant for avoiding difficult decisions, inadequate systems of accountability and cavalier School Board policy.

For example, when a teacher has difficulty with a student, statistically more often a male adolescent, the subject is referred to a guidance counselor or psychologist for evaluation. Thereafter a timely report of findings is required, proposing an individual treatment plan. With the volume of such referrals exceeding the work ethic of the DCPS staff, out-of-time plans routinely trigger default court proceedings that equally routinely result in judicial orders for privately provided educational services wherever available and at whatever cost. And DCPS must then bear the attorney’s fees, distant ongoing placements and transportation costs specified by the decrees.

With turf wars, smoke stack fiefdoms and competitive budgets among DCPS, Youth Services, Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, Child and Family Services, as well as law enforcement; there is no comprehensive program of coordinated care or record keeping, as contemplated under IDEA. Hence costs are not accurately known, properly projected, shared, or budgeted, resulting in a constant pattern of “robbing Peter to pay Paul” to keep the chaotic system afloat, with zero accountability.

Nowhere has there been an assumption of collaborative policy leadership, but a pattern and practice of ducking and hiding, in hopes that the bogeyman of special education will someday go away. In other jurisdictions, innovative, cost-cutting, wraparound services have been creatively devised which *work*.

DC’s quadrupled special education budget crisis is a wholly self-inflicted wound, born of social indifference, professional incompetence, poor job training. It is devoid of any serious educational mission and required supervisory oversight. Hence the taxpayers are left with the bill and the general DCPS student left with vandalized programs and services. Enough is enough! The pigeons have now come home to roost.

So called “Special Education” is at the core regular education that wants for adequate teacher training and/or academic flexibility requiring non-routine solutions. Alternatively it has come to be a vehicle whereby sophisticated parents “game the system” to get their children’s private school fees paid by the state, or poor kids are driven from pillar to post until they drop out or off the deep end into substance abuse or incarceration.

In all of this DCPS has historically been a compliant codefendant, spendthrift of public funds and disinterested in positive outcomes. This has to be changed politically!

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Paid for by the VOTE JENKINS Committee, Alvin Hicks, Treasurer.
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