



Jefferson, 6, and Jonny, 4, (who has autism) stand at entrance to Burton Valley Elementary in Lafayette
Photo by Jennifer Wake

Serving the New Student Population of Autism

By Jennifer Wake

There is a growing shortage of qualified special education credentialed teachers and support staff in public schools – according to the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing – and there is a declining trend in both the number of individuals taking the CBEST and in the number of candidates enrolled in teacher preparation programs.

Yet, according to a recent report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the number of children diagnosed with autism served in public schools under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has increased by more than 500 percent in the last decade. Six million children ages 6 to 21 received public special education services in 2005, and that number is closer to seven million today – with a large percentage of those students attending classes in California.

Kathryn Stewart, clinical psychologist and executive director of Orion Academy in Moraga, a nationally-recognized college preparatory high school for children with Asperger’s Syndrome or Non-verbal Learning Disorder that targets both individual social needs and academic excellence, says the problem “is big, big, big.”

“The reality is there’s a huge problem in the state of California about what services are there, and who is trained to do it,” Stewart said.

Autistic students are entering school districts beginning at age 3 at an annual cost of \$18,000 per student (three times that of typical students), according to the Special Education Expenditure Project (SEEP). Districts are strained by these added costs and are scrambling to find qualified teachers that meet federal guidelines while staying within their budgets.

“We’ve shot ourselves in the foot as a state by making hoops that are impossible for people,” said Stewart, who received her master’s in special education and taught special education at the high school level before starting Orion. “You have good people who look at [the credentialing process] and think ‘Why would I go to all this trouble to make \$40,000 a year?’ They’re not going to do it, so that becomes another problem. There’s no easy solution.”

David Krapf, Saint Mary’s College director of teacher credentialing, recently joined

25 education professionals, service providers, and parents of special needs children in a state-wide special education credentialing workgroup. The workgroup is coordinated by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and is examining the structure and content of the current credentialing program.

Under the current structure at public schools, special education credentials are categorized as mild/moderate and moderate/severe and only those with moderate/severe credentials are authorized to work with autistic children. If someone has a mild/moderate credential and is considering being placed with students on the autistic spectrum, Krapf says they would first need to come back to get their moderate/severe credential to be compliant. This would encompass nearly 300 hours of course work as well as one lengthy seminar. “More people are going into the mild/moderate area than moderate/severe, and that’s a significant problem,” Krapf said. “But nevermind autism – we don’t have an adequate supply of special education teachers, period.”

In addition, districts are coming to Krapf asking the college to add a preschool component to their special education curriculum. “Our students are licensed K through 12, so they would need to have a preschool certificate, or we would need to either create a credential or a certificate,” he said.

But even with institutions like Saint Mary’s offering moderate/severe credentials, it does not change the fact that the current system is broken and needs to be fixed, said Stewart.

“One of the problems in our high schools is we’ve lost track; we’ve gone for what’s cost effective,” Stewart said. “And in the public high school, you have public high school teachers who have no idea how to manage autistic or Asperger’s kids in the classroom. It’s not a money issue with Lamorinda schools. At the administrative level, these districts’ people get it, but training is still an issue.”

Special education classrooms in California used to be divided by each student’s needs – communication disorders, specific learning disabilities – but Stewart says that doesn’t happen anymore. “It’s an unfortunate shift because you have special day classes now in public high schools where this whole group of kids is lumped together.”

Stewart suggests creating small learning communities where kids of like learning would be together. “There are a lot of people out there who have very different views than I have. I am absolutely against the concept of mainstreaming,” she said. “It doesn’t work.”

The solution?

Some education experts suggest four main changes: More support for research on treatment effectiveness; more targeted assistance for professional development offering grants for colleges and universities to create specialties in autism; school district willingness to set up state-of-the-art programs to serve children with autism; and getting parents involved in early intervention.

Until then, Stewart suggests changing the goal: “Our goal as educators should be to create the very best adults we can create.”



Special day classes like this serve pre-school students with autism
Photo by Jennifer Wake

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