

The Bottomless Pit

In Manitoba, special education spending is rising rapidly, with nothing to show for it.
By Dennis Owens

Among the problems facing the public school system, perhaps the least familiar is our troubled approach to students with disabilities. Since 1984, Manitoba's spending on "special needs" students has more than tripled, compared to overall budget increases of about 50%.

This commitment to equity is noble, but the means we use to implement it are not. School boards have perverse incentives to maximize special needs dollars under present funding formulas, yet nobody knows whether the extra money is being successfully directed.

Three explanations of the increase in spending are possible.

- There are approximately three times as many disabled children in schools today as there were 20 years ago.
- School officials have become more adept at diagnosing children with special needs.
- School boards have an economic incentive to apply for as much special education funding as possible, regardless of whether or not it is needed.

The first option strains credulity. While it is certainly possible that there are more disabled children today than 20 years ago, it is highly unlikely that the number would have tripled over a 20-year period.

There is likely some truth to the second option. School boards have become more aware of special needs over the last 20 years and quicker to diagnose students who have special needs. However, is it plausible that such a large number of special needs children previously slipped through the cracks?

Assessment methods may have been refined since 1984, but the science of detecting and evaluating mental disabilities was well advanced 20 years ago. A 300% increase in expenditures can hardly be explained entirely by this option.

The third option bears some weight. Special education has become a growth industry in Manitoba. The more students that are classified as having special needs, the more resource teachers, educational assistants, psychologists, and clinicians will need to be hired.

Since students with special needs receive significantly more funding than regular students, school boards who identify more of these students will be able to hire more teachers and expand school budgets.

Manitoba's Education Budget 2002-2003		
	% of Total	Per-Pupil
Regular Instruction	58.6%	\$4,436
Exceptional	14.0%	1,048
Operations & Maintenance	12.1%	901
Instructional & Pupil Support Services	5.0%	377
Transportation	4.0%	299
Board Administration	3.6%	267
Fiscal	1.8%	132
Community Education Services	0.7%	50
Total	100%	\$7,510

It should be noted that 50% of Level I funding can be diverted into other programs. As a result, school boards have a perverse incentive to maximize their budgets by expanding the identification of special needs students. They have a strong economic incentive to apply for as much special education funding as possible, regardless of whether or not it is needed.

It is not surprising that special education expenditures have continued to grow at exponential speed, especially given the insufficient controls to restrain boards from doing so.

There are other factors driving the increasing costs of special education as well. One is the number of students whose special needs may have been generated by faulty teaching in the primary years. These students fall mainly into the catch-all category of "learning-disabled".

Another factor that is driving up costs is the ideological commitment to "mainstreaming" — the integration of disabled children into regular classrooms — which has become increasingly common over the past 20 years.

In the past, students with significant disabilities were placed in special classrooms and were integrated with the rest of the student body only when it was believed that they could benefit from the instruction. This meant that disabled students received the benefits of individualized attention while school boards could capture economies of scale.

We do the disabled no favours by promising equity and then failing to have them learn useful skills in school. Likewise, we do the other children a disservice by having them learn less when a disabled student is in their classroom. In both cases, we do a disservice to the teacher.

The classification of special needs students focuses more on process than on outcomes. Significant changes in the manner in which special education is funded in Manitoba are needed.

Continually increasing spending on special education without requiring school boards to produce results both dilutes the resources for regular academic instruction and comprises the system's ability to meet special needs.

(Adapted with permission from "Why the Public School System Exaggerates Student Disabilities", www.fcpp.org. Mr. Owens is the Senior Policy Analyst at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy in Winnipeg, MB.)