

Learning-Enabled Students

School choice brings more mainstreaming of special needs students and happier parents.

By Lewis M. Andrews

If the opponents of school choice could have their way, the debate over the use of public money to subsidize private schooling would turn on the subject of special education. Defenders of the educational status quo are actively fanning fears that government support of greater parental choice would transform public schools into dumping grounds for difficult-to-educate students.

The argument that school choice must inevitably create special education ghettos would appear to have been strengthened by the recent adoption of market-based education reforms in New Zealand.

In the late 1980's, that country's Labour government undertook a sweeping reorganization of its highly-centralized education system, replacing the Department of Education and its 4,000 employees with a new ministry of education staffed by only 400 people and putting each local school under the control of a community board of trustees. At the same time, the government abolished school zoning, allowing children to transfer freely between schools, even to private schools, at state expense.

A recent book about these reforms by school choice opponents Edward Fiske and Helen Ladd, *When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale*, makes much of a flaw in the initial legislation which permitted the more popular public schools to reject students who would be costly to educate or whose disabilities might drag down the test averages.

The authors argue that this 'skimming' or 'creaming' of the better students — which did happen in some cases — is an inevitable consequence of any school choice program.

Yet a closer look at how learning-disabled students are actually faring under a variety of school choice programs worldwide suggests that the special education card may not play out exactly as the opponents of market-based education reform hope.

New Zealand

Take New Zealand, which has largely remedied its original legislation with two amendments: a 1999 supplemental voucher program targeted at the indigenous population and a law requiring all schools accepting state funds to adopt a non-discriminatory admissions policy.

Under the new Special Education 2000 policy, schools receive supplemental funding for each learning-disabled child they take in; principals are free to spend the money on what they and the child's parents determine are the most appropriate services. And if the special-needs child leaves the school for any reason, the supplemental funding follows the child to his or her new placement.

As a result of these modifications to the initial law, school choice now enjoys nearly universal public support.

To see more clearly the impact of school choice on the treatment of learning disabilities, it is useful to compare the experience of the Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark. Each has adopted school choice as part of its national education policy, but with very different provisions in the area of special education.

The Netherlands

Consider first the Netherlands, where public funding of parental choice has been national policy since 1917 and where almost two-thirds of Dutch students attend private schools.

Until about 15 years ago, universal school choice for mainstream students co-existed with a separate, complex, and cumbersome arrangement for educating the learning-disabled.

The Dutch had actually maintained 14 separate school systems, each geared to a particular learning disability — deafness, physical handicaps, mental retardation, and so on — and each mimicking as closely as possible the grade levels of conventional public and private schools.

This separate-but-parallel system did employ private providers; it also tested children regularly to determine whether any might be eligible for transfer to mainstream schools. But by the late 1980s, the Dutch began to notice a disturbing increase in the percentage of pupils classified as learning-disabled.

There was widespread concern that the special education bureaucracy was expanding its services at the expense of children with mild-to-moderate leaning problems, who were not being adequately integrated into mainstream society. The key to reform, many believed, was to create a financial structure that gave parents of special-needs children the same educational choices as other parents.

Under a "Going to School Together" policy adopted by the Netherlands in 1990, it became the stated intention of the Ministry of Education that "parents of children with disabilities should . . . be able to choose between [any] ordinary or a special school for their child."

Children who required additional services for serious learning disabilities were awarded "a personal budget" which under Dutch law parents could spend at either a special or a mainstream school. Today, the Dutch educational structure enjoys strong support from all political quarters, but especially from advocates of greater inclusion for the learning-disabled.

Sweden

Compare the evolution of special education in the Netherlands with Sweden, which in March 1992 adopted a "Freedom of Choice and Independent Schools" bill. It gave parents "the right and opportunity to choose a school and education for one's children" by granting all independent schools a municipal subsidy equal to 85% of the public school per-pupil cost multiplied by that private or parochial school's enrollment.

Like the Dutch, the Swedes adopted a universal choice policy, but with one important limitation: the parents of special education students were not effectively granted the same freedom as parents of normal children.

The result today is that the majority of Sweden's deaf students are still educated in separate institutions. Other special-needs students, who supposedly have been integrated into the educational mainstream, continue to suffer under a centrally-managed system in which support services are negotiated between school principals and municipal finance officers, with parents having little input.

One interesting consequence of this lingering paternalism is that the percentage of Swedish children classified as needing special education services is high relative to other industrialized countries and continues to grow at a disproportionate rate.

Denmark

Denmark's political support for private education dates back to 1899, and 11% of Danish students attend more than 400 private schools with municipal governments covering 80-85% of the cost. Parents normally have the final say over what school their learning-disabled son or daughter attends and, if an independent school is chosen, the Ministry of Education pays a sum per pupil to the receiving school. The startling result is that only 0.7% of Denmark's 80,000 learning-disabled students are confined to specialized institutions — as compared to five times that percentage in the United States.

One obvious conclusion to be drawn from the Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark — as well as from the experience of New Zealand — is that inclusion is not only possible under school choice, but with the right policy adjustments, may succeed to an extent not even imagined by North American educators.

The critical variable appears to be the willingness of legislators to extend freedom of choice to all parents, including the parents of the learning-disabled.

Australia

In Australia, a school choice country where supplemental funding to support special education is provided to both private and public schools by the national government — but where individual territories have wide discretion in directing how the money is spent — regions which provide the most flexibility to parents of the learning-disabled also have the best record of mainstreaming.

From 1990 to 1995, the percentage of special-needs students successfully integrated into schools in New South Wales more than doubled, while the number of Schools for Special Purposes (the Australian euphemism for segregated special-needs schools) declined sharply. By contrast, West Australia retained most of its separate schools.

United Kingdom

If there is a cautionary lesson to be learned from the experience of foreign countries, it comes from the United Kingdom, where in 1981 the parliament adopted the Assisted Places Scheme with the aim of providing private school tuition scholarships to 11-, 12-, and 13-year-old children from low-income families. By 1992, there were more than 26,000 voucher students attending almost 300 independent schools through England and Wales.

Yet in spite of the program's apparent success, the annual enrollment cap of 5,000 was not raised, nor was there a serious effort to include children in their younger, more formative years.

Instead, an "open enrollment" system was enacted, whereby all students were allowed to transfer between government-run schools on a space-available basis but no funding could follow a student to private or religious schools, thus inhibiting the ability of education entrepreneurs to offer students real academic options.

The result of Britain's attempt to limit parental choice to government schools has been to create the very special education ghettos that opponents of school reform say they are against.

"Popular schools in wealthy communities have devised many subtle ways to keep out expensive-to-educate students," observes Philip Garner, research professor in special education at Nottingham Trent University.

Children with learning disabilities are "confined to failing schools in poorer districts, such as Liverpool, Tower Hamlets, and Hackney." In a telling indication of popular dissatisfaction with England's 'moderate' approach to choice, the number of appeals brought before that country's special education tribunal reached 35 per week in the school year 1995-96.

Florida

In the US, the widespread parental dissatisfaction with special education is illustrated by Florida's Sarasota County. In 1999, a sweeping pilot program for learning-disabled students allowed them to transfer to a private school if their parents expressed dissatisfaction over their progress at meeting the goals of their individualized instructional plans.

So popular was the pilot program that just one year later, the state legislature passed an amendment to the original A+ Plan allowing the Sarasota County provision to apply to the entire state.

Although researchers have yet to identify the precise reason the amendment had such easy political sailing, anecdotal evidence suggests it was due to strong backing from the parents of learning-disabled students.

While the prospect of advocates for the learning-disabled leading the charge for school choice will doubtless come as a shock to the teachers unions and their political allies, it is hardly without precedent. Much of the shift toward the privatization of public education in Europe and elsewhere has come from political activism on behalf of special-needs students.

(Adapted with permission from "More Choices for Disabled Kids," the Hoover Institution's Policy Review, No. 112. Mr. Andrews is executive director of the Yankee Institute for Public Policy in Hartford, Connecticut.)