

"General Inclusive Education Makes Everyone A Winner" by Ari Ne'eman

Category : Secondary Education & Inclusion

Published by Scott Robertson [admin] on 2007/3/2

Published in the Home News Tribune newspaper
September 26, 2006

As an individual on the autism spectrum -- I am an Asperger's autistic -- my educational career included a wide variety of placements. Before I graduated high school, I spent time in both segregated and inclusive learning environments. That is why I came to give my views last week at the Middlesex County Board of Freeholders meeting on the construction of two new segregated schools for students with disabilities.

The plan, opposed by the state Public Advocate's Office, the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, or SPAN, the Coalition for Inclusive Education, and many others, would borrow \$40 million to fund the building of these two new separate facilities, rather than spend the money in a way that would allow students to be educated in their home districts.

As the only individual with a disability who gave testimony on the issue and as a member of the state Special Education Review Commission, I am particularly disappointed that the freeholders voted for the bond and, thus, for continuing with an outdated educational model that does not serve the interests of New Jersey's students.

Schools reflect society's treatment of people. Segregated school placements lead to a segregated society, whereas inclusion at the earliest stages can lead toward increased opportunities for disabled citizens in independent living and success of all types. A society that separates its children will maintain those separations indefinitely, maintaining the attitudinal barriers to inclusion that damage all involved. In New Jersey, the number of students educated outside of their home schools is more than three times the national average. For too many students, inclusion remains a dream deferred.

It is true that not all students can be educated in an inclusive environment. Small minorities of students do exist that benefit from separate placements, most notably those with medically fragile conditions. No one denies that placements should be available for those students. Yet, with one of the buildings these two new facilities will replace at only 62 percent capacity, and with the new buildings designed not for the medically fragile but for the autistic and emotionally disturbed populations, we have to question whether this was truly necessary. In fact, the percentage of emotionally disturbed students being educated out of district has consistently decreased over the last several years, and many options for inclusion can exist for autistic students as well, should schools pursue effective regional cooperation solutions.

Inclusion requires more than simple integration. Particularly for those with the most severe disabilities, it requires the hiring of extra teachers and trained professionals providing students with intensive educational strategies. This can be provided in district schools -- evidence shows that doing so improves behavioral, social and academic outcomes -- but doing so requires funding beyond what is often provided. Many higher income districts can afford to pick up the cost with minimal county or

state aid, but if the freeholders truly desire to improve student outcomes, they should have used the money they so readily borrowed to make inclusion available for every possible student, regardless of income level or geographic location. Ironically, such a solution would still be more cost-effective than building separate facilities for the disabled, a cost that rises exponentially over time as transportation and tuition costs build up. At a time when the statewide property-tax crunch has caused many to target rising special-education funds as a cause, a sustainable model for spending that meets students needs is required. In fact, rather than being, as one person at the hearing put it, a "lose-lose" proposition, inclusive education reflects a "win-win" for everyone involved, as research shows that it both drastically increases the possibilities for students with disabilities and provides a more efficient and effective model for education.

Finally, this is not merely a matter of conflicting administrative positions on where to educate students with disabilities -- it is a battle over whether our state's disabled citizens deserve the right to claim a place in mainstream society. I spent two years in a segregated out-of-district placement and there I saw a distinct gap between the goals and opportunities of children educated in regular education and those educated in segregated placements. Whereas I was encouraged to plan for college during the time I spent in my district high school, the focus of the teaching activities in the out-of-district placement was on vocational tasks, like washing dishes or serving food. The academic instruction was far below that I would later enjoy in district. The freeholders talked about fulfilling a "moral responsibility" to students with disabilities. Take a real step toward fulfilling that responsibility toward us: Fund inclusion programs, and bring our students back to their home schools.

Ari Ne'eman is a member of the N.J. Special Education Review Commission and the founder and president of the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, an advocacy organization representing the autistic community.