

N.J.'s shameful record with disabled students

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The Record Editorial

NEW JERSEY'S public school system is in a rut. It segregates special-education students from non-disabled students at a rate far higher than the national average.

It spends lots of taxpayer money doing it: Publicly financed tuition at schools for the disabled can easily run \$50,000 per child, or more. The state's systematic segregation also violates federal law.

But many schools won't stop this practice, and the state Department of Education hasn't made them. Last week, four leading advocacy groups for children and the disabled filed a federal lawsuit against the state to force change.

Good.

State education officials have for years acknowledged the problem of confining too many disabled students to separate classes and schools. They have not done enough to fix it.

Special-education students are supposed to be educated in the "least restrictive environment." They are supposed to be kept in classes with non-disabled peers as much as possible. That is required by law. It's also sound educational policy.

New Jersey, though, has a decades-old habit of separating disabled students, including those who have only mild disabilities or who have a physical impairment but normal cognitive abilities. The state has about 200 public schools solely for the disabled, such as those run by the Bergen County Special Services District. It approves placements in about 175 private, special education schools.

The U.S. government warned New Jersey eight years ago its high level of segregation violated the law. But the problem is getting worse, according to the suit.

In 1993, 8.9 percent of the state's special-education students were in segregated settings. In 2004, the percentage had increased to 9.6 percent -- more than twice the national rate. Minority children with disabilities fare the worst. They are more likely than whites to get confined to separate schools or classes.

Many students with mild or moderate disabilities might benefit from some time each day in a separate special-education class. The problem arises when they are kept in segregated classes or schools all day.

State education officials seem sincere about wanting to change. Governor Corzine recently approved spending \$19 million to reduce segregation of disabled students. But as a lawyer for plaintiffs in the suit said, the state isn't tough enough. It offers incentives for districts to keep disabled students in regular classes. It doesn't threaten them with sanctions if they fail.

The lawsuit calls for many constructive changes, including more training for teachers on educating the disabled and new school-funding rules that would spur districts to keep disabled children in regular classes.

When children with disabilities are educated with non-disabled peers, they gain academically and socially. The non-disabled students gain, too. Research shows non-disabled students in classes with special-education students perform at higher levels.

New Jersey has every reason to stop the over-segregation of disabled children. It has no good reason to continue. We hope this lawsuit will give the state the push it needs for strong action.

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