

THE STATE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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Catholic educators in recent years have worked to increase their schools' capacity to provide special education services to more students. The expansion of federal programs to support students with special needs has aided in dealing with this issue, but it has also exacerbated problems. The exacerbation comes from the increased focus on both the needs of children and the inability of the schools to respond positively as often as they would like. The aid comes in the form of some governmental assistance as well as increased financial support from local sources. However, the demand for services continues to exceed the resources available to respond. This paper explores the current dimensions of this situation.

INTRODUCTION

There is no more painful conversation for Catholic school principals than when they must inform a family that the special needs of one of their children cannot be met by the school and they must transfer that child – usually accompanied by others in the family – to a public school so that the child's needs can be adequately met. It is to eliminate these painful local encounters, often followed by a nearly as painful appeal to diocesan officials, that has in part motivated Catholic educators to expand their schools' capacity to provide special education services to more students. However, the demand for services for students with special needs far exceeds the capacity to respond in almost all instances.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

The term special education generally refers to educational programs designed to serve children with a variety of disabilities which may interfere with their capacity to be schooled successfully without some particular interventions. Operationally, special education is largely defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA). First enacted in 1975 as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, the law guarantees

a “free, appropriate public education” to children with disabilities and provides that they be educated with their non-disabled peers in the “least restrictive environment.” The act also provides that a portion of the federal funds be used to serve students placed by their parents in private schools, including Catholic schools. Under the law, these funds must be used for services administered either directly or indirectly by public school officials. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that in the year 2004 approximately 6 million schoolchildren, ages 6 to 21, received special education services under IDEA, about two-thirds of whom have specific learning disabilities or speech or language impairments (Education Week Research Center, 2006). A recent study by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) found that 7% – approximately 185,000 – of the nearly 2.6 million students enrolled in Catholic schools have learning disabilities (USCCB, 2002a).

While the challenges for public schools in this area are considerable, those facing Catholic educators have additional dimensions. In all cases, federal funding is far less than what is required by the documented need. The needs of students enrolled in public schools, of course, can – indeed must – be funded fully by state and local governments. A few states extend some services to students enrolled by their parents in Catholic schools. For example, both Iowa and New Jersey by law provide proportionate funding for students in Catholic schools, more than \$37 million and \$26 million respectively in a recent year (USCCB, 2004). IDEA itself requires proportionate federal spending on children with special needs in public and private schools, including Catholic schools.

CHURCH TEACHING

In 1972, the bishops issued a document, *To Teach as Jesus Did*, which addressed a host of issues in American Catholic education broadly defined. Although they did not address the schooling of students with special needs, they did advocate for the “right of the handicapped to receive religious education adapted to their special needs” within Church programs (National Conference of Catholic Bishops [NCCB], 1972, p. 27).

In 1978, in a pastoral statement on people with disabilities, the bishops did acknowledge that they had sometimes been reactive rather than proactive in responding to the concerns of those with special needs (United States Catholic Conference [USCC], 1978). However, in this document they committed themselves to a heightened level of priority in this area.

We the bishops now designate ministry to people with disabilities as a special focus for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops....This represents a mandate to each office and secretariat, as it develops its plans and programs, to

address the concerns of individuals with disabilities. (§32)

Further, they called “upon people of good will to reexamine their attitudes toward their brothers and sisters with disabilities and promote their well-being, acting with a sense of justice and the compassion that the Lord so clearly desires” (USCC, 1978, §1). They made a special point of challenging educators in parish catechetical programs as well as personnel in elementary and secondary schools to upgrade their efforts to serve students with special needs (USCC, 1978). The bishops grounded their position on this issue in part on the Scriptural teaching: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Rom. 13:9).

Subsequently, the American bishops have reiterated their continuing support in this area on a number of occasions. For example, in 1995, they issued guidelines for the celebration of sacraments with persons of disabilities (USCC, 1995) and in 2002 a pastoral statement, *Welcome and Justice for Persons with Disabilities: A Framework for Access and Inclusion* (USCCB, 2002b).

The Vatican also has addressed this issue over recent decades. As one would expect, Church teaching is situated in a fundamental understanding of the human person in creation. The 1981 Document of the Holy See for the International Year of Disabled Persons identifies as a basic principle that the disabled person is fully human and endowed with a unique dignity and that this dignity is grounded in Biblical anthropology: that of man “created in the image of God” (Gn. 1:27).

In addressing this issue worldwide, the Vatican stresses the role of the family in supporting those with special needs but also stresses that the family has the right to expect support both from the state as well as the Church. Governments have an obligation to provide legislation which allows families to have access to services that persons with disabilities require and that “the Church should be in front line in protecting the rights of a child or adult with disabilities to education in all the formation environments run by church realities, from infant school to universities” (Committee for the Jubilee Day, 2000, §3.5).

CATHOLIC SCHOOL HISTORY

Catholic schools are not legally required to accept students with disabilities but doing so is consistent with Church teaching. Accepting such students, however, presents a moral dilemma to Catholic educators. On the one hand, admitting such students reflects sound Catholic teaching; on the other, it requires that the school be able to meet the needs of such students.

Although the Church has a long-standing tradition of serving children

with special needs, it developed along two paths historically. The first, and by far the largest, were schools specifically devoted to the education of students with specific handicaps; the second involved providing special services to students in regular schools. As early as 1842, Sisters of the Good Shepherd were working with socially maladjusted girls in Louisville, Kentucky, and St. Coletta's School for Exceptional Children was founded in 1904 in Jefferson, Wisconsin (Buetow, 1970). Throughout the 20th century, both religious communities and dioceses founded numerous schools for children with various handicapping conditions. By the mid-1960s, almost every diocese had made provision for one or more such institutions by various means. For example, in 1960, there were 14 schools for the deaf operating under Catholic auspices enrolling more than 2,000 students (Buetow, 1970). In 1965, the National Catholic Educational Association's (NCEA) listing of institutions for handicapped students identified 71 schools serving nearly 7,000 students in special institutions (Buetow, 1970). The NCEA established a Department of Special Education in 1954, which focused mainly on supporting the work of these day schools and residential centers (Weaver & Landers, 2002).

On the other hand, there was far less activity in the parochial schools. While the schools served the poor and working classes, they typically did not serve significant numbers of students with learning disabilities. One of the earliest efforts was in the Archdiocese of St. Louis, which established a Department of Special Education in 1950 (Buetow, 1970). It was not until the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 that this began to change. As the public schools were mandated to serve all students with disabilities in regular schools, Catholic schools and Catholic families began to explore how they too could expand this area of service. The bishops, through a series of related statements over several decades, encouraged this expanded effort. However, only rarely were diocesan offices staffed with appropriate personnel to carry out such services. Where such services developed was almost always a result of local initiative.

NATIONAL CATHOLIC EDUCATIONAL ASSOCIATION (NCEA)

Although its existence has been intermittent over the past 50 years, NCEA's Office of Special Education has advocated and provided professional support for Catholic educators to explore how they might provide services to students with special needs in regular classroom settings. One element in renewing interest in special education was the NCEA publication, *Is There Room for Me?* (Dudek, 1998). The book provided practical ideas and encour-

agement for special education in Catholic schools, but more importantly, its title encouraged many at the national level to rethink how to address this issue. Its publication moved the issue to the top of the association's agenda, especially at the elementary level. At the national level, another individual who actively encouraged a stronger effort in this area was Mary Jane Owen, Executive Director of the National Catholic Office for Persons with Disabilities. Owen's personal witness and public advocacy were instrumental in supporting many diocesan efforts, as well as advancing the reach of the University of Dayton's Center for Ministry with Disabled Persons.

NCEA's Selected Programs for Improving Catholic Education (SPICE) program in the summer of 1998 focused in part on identifying successful local programs in this area. Programs from St. Thomas Aquinas School in Indianapolis, Indiana; St. Peter Inter-Parish School, Jefferson City, Missouri; and the Mecklenburg area Catholic schools in Charlotte, North Carolina, were among those highlighted (DeFiore, 2001). The Mecklenburg program consists of a local consortium of schools: one high school, one middle school, and five elementary schools serving nearly 4,000 students. The cooperative program provides assistance to each school community in identifying students who need additional educational support as well as direct specialized instruction for students who are appropriately placed in an inclusive learning environment. Support is provided to the regular classroom teachers by the program staff in making appropriate modifications for students. In addition, assistance is provided to parents who are seeking information and/or services for their children. The key to success is the availability of the learning-support, program staff who screen and refer students, suggest and direct services, as well as monitor student progress. By forming a consortium among several schools, they were able to develop a critical mass of resources to provide a reasonable level of support to all of the schools (DeFiore, 2001).

Subsequently, NCEA sponsored two national conferences on the issue. The conferences were entitled *Making Room for Me* – clearly linking these responses to the challenge of the earlier question. They were held in 2000 and 2001 in California and Florida respectively. Both conferences highlighted the need for Catholic dioceses and schools to address this issue more effectively and presented successful, locally-developed models which others might emulate or adapt to their local circumstances. Presentations by individual schools as well as dioceses were made describing successful inclusive and other practices in Catholic schools around the country.

These were followed by journal articles and other publications on the topic by NCEA. For example, the May 2000 edition of *Momentum* featured a special section, "Making Room for Me – Including Children with Special

Needs” (Dudek, 2000). Further, an expanded series of sessions was offered at the national conventions for the next several years at both the elementary and secondary levels as well as special presentations at the annual meetings of diocesan superintendents. For example, in 2004 in Dallas, the superintendents were briefed about exemplary programs in the Archdioceses of Louisville and St. Louis as well as the Dioceses of Orange, Sioux Falls, and Fort Wayne-South Bend. Finally, among the new resources developed were scholarship grants for Catholic school teachers pursuing graduate study in special education. The grants were funded by the Catholic Daughters of America and administered by the NCEA.

Although most of the initial activity both at the NCEA and in the schools was at the elementary school level, Catholic high schools also began to expand their efforts. In 1998, about one third of the high schools indicated that they provided some accommodations for students with disabilities, admittedly to small numbers of students with a limited range of special needs (Guerra, 1998). Just several years later, in 2002, 36% of the high schools reported having a teacher on staff with a degree in special education. These teachers provided a range of services for students including one-on-one tutorial assistance, consultation with teachers to develop accommodations, counseling services, and direct classroom instruction. Accommodations ranged from changes in testing and assessment to varying methods of instruction and alternative homework assignments. On the other hand, a majority of the schools had yet to participate in accessing services under IDEA (Hudson, 2002).

An additional challenge for high schools, especially those with competitive academic programs and selective admissions policies, is how to maintain standards of excellence and still broaden the range of student learning needs served.

Finally, the NCEA publishes data about the types of disabilities found in Catholic schools (see Table 1). Schools reported that they enrolled on average 14 students who were classified as having special needs. About one third of the schools indicated they had a paid resource teacher to assist children with special needs, up 5% from 2001 (Bimonte, 2004).

Table 1

Percent of U.S. Catholic Elementary and Middle Schools With Selected Disabilities

| Disability category | 1997 | 1999 | 2003 |
|--|------|------|------|
| Speech impairments | 62% | 74% | 62% |
| Learning disabilities | 66% | 79% | 68% |
| Physical disabilities | 20% | 20% | 17% |
| Hearing impairments | 25% | 25% | 18% |
| Visual impairments | 16% | 15% | 13% |
| Autism/non-language learning disorders | 5% | 21% | 15% |
| Emotional/behavioral | 5% | 21% | 20% |
| ADD/ADHD | -- | -- | 60% |
| Multiple disabilities | -- | -- | 14% |

Note. Sources: Bimonte, 2004; Kealey, 1998, 2000

UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS (USCCB)

As part of this increased interest in special education, the Department of Education at the USCCB conducted a national study of Catholic school children with disabilities in which they documented the number of children with disabilities in Catholic schools as well as the extent of services provided to them (USCCB, 2002a). They followed this with a *Resource Directory* published in 2004.

The principal findings of the USCCB (2002a) study, entitled *Catholic School Children with Disabilities*, are summarized below.

- About 7% of students in Catholic schools are children with disabilities (185,000) compared to more than 11% in public school.
- The majority of the cost of providing special education services in Catholic schools is provided by parents and/or tuition. Thirty-four percent of all services provided to such students are supported by tuition.
- Resource room/pullout programs and in-class accommodations are the primary means of providing services.
- The Child Find process (IDEA) is inconsistent and difficult to access for parents of children in Catholic schools. Even when properly identified,

the diagnostic outcomes via the public schools appear seriously flawed and unreliable. Catholic school children are less likely to be diagnosed with a disability by a public school evaluator than through a private evaluator.

- Catholic school students diagnosed as having a disability are not receiving services through IDEA sufficient to adequately address their disability.

RESPONSES IN THE FIELD

Both at the diocesan and local levels, services expanded but in an uneven fashion. Mostly, progress occurred in those dioceses and schools where leadership was involved and resources were developed. This pattern reflects the decentralized nature of Catholic schooling in most dioceses especially in the financing of schools. In some dioceses, groups of schools such as the Center City Consortium in Washington, DC, and the Mecklenburg schools in Charlotte proceeded collectively. For the most part, however, progress is a school-by-school pattern of development, mostly the result of local initiative.

The archdiocese with the longest history in special education is St. Louis, and it exemplifies one model of how to provide support successfully at that level. For more than a decade, it has used a special needs consultant model, using a team approach, working primarily with classroom teachers to help them both understand the needs of students and identify accommodations that promise to meet those needs. It also assists students and families to access services outside the school. The archdiocesan staff has developed a manual which provides guidance to schools in implementing successful interventions in this area. Additionally, the Archdiocese of St. Louis (2005) sponsors a Catholic Guidance Office which provides affordable evaluation services to determine a child's need for special learning strategies – either within a traditional school setting or in an alternative learning environment.

In addition, a number of individual schools across the country with local leadership and resources successfully offer services to some children with special needs. Typical of these are those described in various NCEA publications as well as in the Weaver and Landers (2002) chapter “Serving Students with Special Needs in Catholic Schools.” In these instances successful programs and best practices are highlighted to guide those who are considering initiating or upgrading their own special education programs.

The Weaver and Landers (2002) study focused on describing the expanding development of special education services in Catholic education in the 1980s and 1990s. They identify a number of successful programs at both the school and diocesan levels, some including collaboration with nearby Catholic universities. Among diocesan programs, they highlight the inclusive education program developed in the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph as

well as the resource program initiated in the Diocese of Venice, both in the 1990s. As examples of universities which collaborated with dioceses in developing strong programs for students with special needs they highlight two in Ohio, one at the University of Dayton and another at Xavier University. The University of Dayton initiated a series of conferences promoting inclusive educational practices in Catholic educational settings. Among the results of the Dayton effort, for example, has been the creation of the Network of Inclusive Catholic Educators, a support mechanism for those with interests in this area (Weaver & Landers, 2002).

Finally, the USCCB's (2002a) study summarizes the responses by the schools about the nature of the services provided. For the most part – about two thirds – students are served in resource rooms and by other types of pull-out interventions. Twenty-eight percent indicate they use some in-classroom, inclusion accommodations (USCCB, 2002a). Weaver and Landers (2002) found that elementary programs range from intensive remediation to full inclusion. That there is less use of inclusive models in Catholic schools likely reflects a combination of insufficient resources in terms of personnel (special educators) as well as support and training for classroom teachers. On the other hand, the track record of Catholic schools generally indicates that they are often able to achieve high levels of success with less than adequate resources.

INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION IMPROVEMENT ACT (IDEIA) 2004

In its 2002 study, the Department of Education at the USCCB was critical of the quality of implementation of the law at that time. For example, they found that although public school districts are obligated to locate, identify, and evaluate any child suspected of having a disability, including those in Catholic schools, Catholic school parents and staff have long reported difficulties in accessing these services. They reported that “the implementation of the (Child Find) process for children in Catholic schools is fragmented at best and ‘inhospitable’ to children with disabilities whose parents chose to enroll them in Catholic schools” (USCCB, 2002a, pp. 12-13). Even when finally examined, the child is significantly less likely to be diagnosed with a disability by a public school evaluator than through a private evaluator

When the Child Find process works and the child is determined to have a disability, getting services for the child with special needs is also difficult. The study found that only 13% of the cost of special education and related services for Catholic school students with disabilities is funded by IDEA. Another 34% of the cost is paid by the schools from general revenues; the rest presumably is paid for either by state funds when available or by the fam-

ily directly, in addition to tuition (USCCB, 2002a). In short, neither the Child Find nor the service provision parts of IDEA appear to be working adequately for Catholic school students with special needs. The 2004 reauthorization process, statute, and regulations, presented an opportunity for improving this situation. Congress reauthorized the law as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) in November 2004 and at the present time the rule-making process is ongoing.

Three organizations representing the interests of Catholic schools and the families who patronize them work on improving IDEA: USCCB, NCEA, and the Council for American Private Education (CAPE). All three of their websites provide detailed information about the reauthorized law and guidance about how to optimize participation under it.

REAUTHORIZATION

Will the changes make a difference? Yes and no. What did not change are the basic categories of eligibility under the law. There will still be two classes of “student-citizens” – children whose parents enroll them in public schools and children whose parents enroll them in private schools. For the former, IDEIA requires states to provide a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. To the extent possible, children with disabilities are entitled to the same educational experience as their non-disabled peers. In short, these children are entitled to special education and related services provided at public expense under public supervision – without charge. The fundamental document in the implementation of the law is the Individualized Education Program (IEP) which lays out precisely how the child will be served in the least restrictive environment (Committee on Education and the Workforce, 2005). This in effect is an individual entitlement under the law to a program tailored to meet the documented needs of the child and which must be fully funded by the public school district using both federal and local resources as necessary

On the other hand, the parentally-placed child in a private, including Catholic, school, may or may not receive special education and related services. This depends upon the determination of eligibility through the Child Find process as well as whether or not the type of service required is part of the plan negotiated with public school officials in allocating the proportionate amount of IDEIA funds. Such Catholic school children as a group are entitled to their share of IDEIA funds through services provided by the public schools, but there is no individual entitlement. Thus, IDEIA 2004 treats Catholic school children with special needs the same way as the old law did. The parents of such children are confronted with a hard choice: enroll in a Catholic school and possibly forego essential rights and services for their

child or enroll in a public school and retain those rights and services.

IDEIA 2004, however, does include important procedural improvements that are intended to help private school students obtain more equitable treatment than in the past. Below are some of the more important of these changes.

- Changes the target child find and service populations from children residing in the district to children attending private schools in the district.
- Incorporates within the statute the current regulatory requirement that a school district's child find activities for private school children be comparable to those for public school children.
- Requires school districts to document to the state its activities with private school children as well as to obtain written affirmation from private school officials that meaningful consultation has occurred.
- Clarifies that school districts may provide services to private school students directly or through third parties.
- Provides for a bypass process should public school officials fail or be unwilling to provide equitable participation for private school students (Council for American Private Education, 2004).

It is likely that these and other procedural improvements will make obtaining benefits under the law more efficient; however, they are unlikely to have much of an impact on the "bottom line" – improving significantly the resources available to and thus the ability of Catholic schools to provide services to their students with special needs. Even if more children are found and diagnosed properly, and if consultation improves and better reports are made, the fundamental problem persists: the gap between the demands for services and the resources to provide them remains essentially unchanged.

Clearly, IDEA, even in its new and improved 2004 version, will be inadequate for what is required by Catholic school students with special needs. Under the law, comparable public school students are guaranteed – at least in theory – proper diagnosis and treatment of their needs at government expense. Under IDEIA, Catholic school students are guaranteed – again in theory – a proportionate share of the federal appropriation for services as a group but there is no individual entitlement. Thus, in the near term, special education services in Catholic schools will continue to be funded mostly by parents of such children either directly or through enhanced tuition for all students. Thus, the serious limitations of funding and staffing both at the diocesan and building levels will continue to cap the level of effort that can be made. As a result, it is likely that the schools that provide such programs on a reasonable scale will be limited to those that serve more affluent families or, at the other end of the spectrum, inner city schools which are support-

ed either by a diocese or special scholarship/support funds. Those schools serving working class and rural families will most likely continue to be unable to provide sufficient support. An exception may be schools in those dioceses that make a serious commitment to support and supplement local efforts with significant programs at that level.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, the past decade has seen a significant growth in services for students with special needs in Catholic schools. It is likely that the trend will continue among schools in affluent communities and those with substantial subsidies. However, middle class and rural parishes will be far more challenged to do so. They will continue to struggle to develop additional resources to expand services. They will struggle especially to acquire additional personnel with specialized training who could work with students with special needs and their families directly as well as serve as resources to regular classroom teachers to help improve their ability to manage inclusive classrooms more effectively. Whether dioceses whose financial resources are currently severely constrained by other issues are capable of significant intervention is questionable.

Federal aid will continue to be limited given the nature of the legislation as well as the limited level of its funding. It may be possible in selected states to obtain legislation that will improve service availability from that source, but that is dependent upon local political circumstances. More realistically, if Catholic schools are to continue to expand their ability to serve students with special needs in the short term, they will have to make the case to parishioners that this is an aspect of ministry that deserves additional consideration. Given the positive response to the case made for greater support for inner city schools; given the current average of approximately 15 students with special needs per school; and given the increasing relative affluence of the Catholic laity; this prospect does not seem unreasonable. The challenge is whether diocesan and local leaders can inspire the laity to respond to this need with the necessary enthusiasm.

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