

By Chester Finn, Jr.

Overhauling Special Education: A Futile Hope?

In a searing exposé, reminiscent of Upton Sinclair and the heyday of journalistic muckraking, the *Houston Chronicle* has assembled persuasive evidence that Texas has placed a de facto cap of 8.5 percent on the number of kids who can be placed in special education. Assuming it's true—state officials seemed to waffle, fiddle, and redefine when asked tough questions by the reporter—this would go a long way toward explaining why the Lone Star State has for years had a rate of special-ed placements below just about everywhere else in the union, and far below a handful of jurisdictions (such as Massachusetts) that are pushing 20 percent. The national figure is about 13 percent, but the state-to-state variability is wide—although Texas, along with California and a handful of others, has long been a low-end outlier.

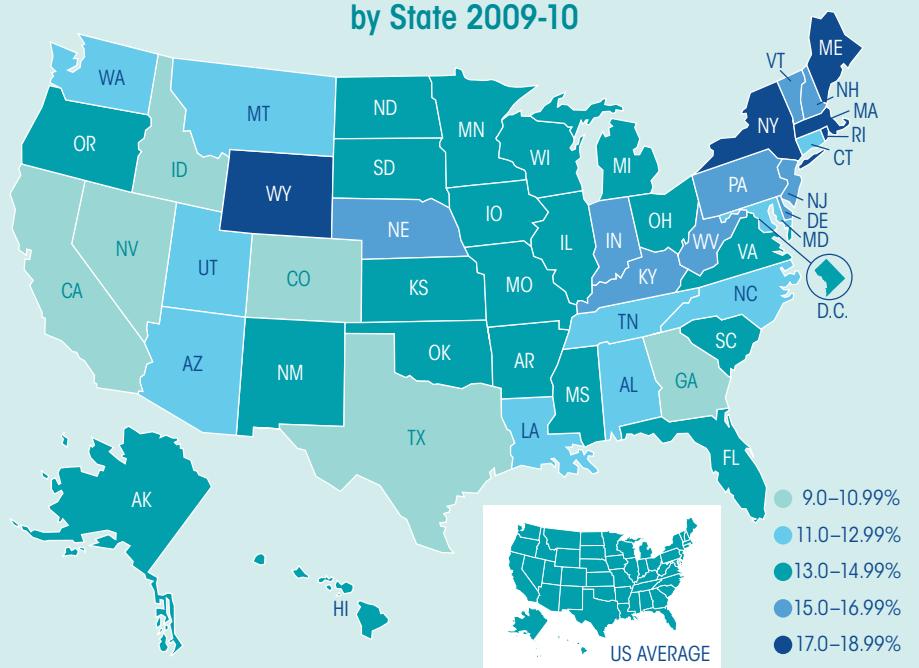
Assuming that kids don't differ all that much from Boston to Austin, one may fairly wonder what accounts for the big discrepancies—and there's no doubt that state and local implementation practices must account for a lot.

A child typically qualifies for special education placement upon being “referred” by a teacher or petitioned by a parent, and then evaluated for evidence of disabilities by people—mainly psychologists—who are presumed to know what they're looking for. Once brought into the special-ed system, children qualify for all manner of extra services and accommodations, and parents gain all sorts of rights and prerogatives with regard to their children's education that other families don't have—most of which add to school system costs.

It's no secret that, from the standpoint of state and district education budgets, special ed is expensive, often accounting for a quarter (or more) of their entire K–12 operating outlays. Although the historical record indicates that Uncle Sam once committed to cover the extra cost (estimated at an additional 40 percent of regular per-pupil funding per disabled student), except for a brief windfall in 2009, the actual federal appropriation has been more like 17 or 18 percent. The estimated federal shortfall in fiscal 2014 was \$17 billion—costs that end up being born by states and districts. Because special ed, once conferred on a child, is, in essence, a civil right, those jurisdictions don't have a lot of choice in the matter.



Identification Rates of Students with Disabilities, by State 2009-10



Although, as Nathan Levenson showed in a 2012 Fordham report, savvy districts can take steps to make their special-ed programs both more effective and cost-efficient, it's understandable why a state or district might want to keep the number of special education students within bounds. It's equally understandable why parents of youngsters who face behavioral, physical, or learning challenges in school—parents such as those profiled in the *Chronicle*—will move heaven and earth to get their daughters and sons the added services, assistance, and considerations that come with special ed. One can hardly blame them.

How many children *belong* in special education is a question with no definitive answer. The *Chronicle* cited a recent Center for Disease Control (CDC) estimate that 15.4 percent of young children have been diagnosed by doctors as having “a mental, behavioral, or develop-

mental disorder.” Back when IDEA's antecedent was enacted, policy-makers expected the take-up rate to be around 6 percent. The federal financial contribution is supposed to plateau at 12 percent. However, the percentage gradually crept up to almost 14 percent by 2005 as more and more youngsters were referred on one basis or another, especially under the broad and rather nebulous heading of “learning disabilities.” It's declined a bit since then—and one must wonder how much of that decline is due to Texas intentionally cutting its special-ed numbers.

Those bases for referral, however, are often subjective and discretionary—one reason that state special education rates are so discrepant—and in some cases (beyond the most conspicuous, indeed unarguable, physical, mental, and emotional disabilities) referrals to special ed may fairly be questioned. When they're based on “behavioral” issues, it's no secret that many a teacher would just as soon rid her

classroom of that kid who keeps acting up. When they're based on “learning” issues, a typical diagnosis is based on test-derived discrepancies between a child's ability and his or her achievement. Yet how to know whether an achievement shortfall is due to something inherent in the child? As former NIH executive Reid Lyon—the moving force behind the National Reading Panel in 2000—once wrote, many kids diagnosed as “learning disabled” are actually “teaching disabled.” Because nobody ever taught them to read properly, they naturally fare poorly on gauges of academic success that rely on their reading prowess. Does that mean they need special ed—or better reading teachers in the early grades?

It's also no secret, unfortunately, that more than a few parents, having learned of the extra attention and accommodations that special education students get—such as extra time to take college entrance tests!—have pushed hard to get their youngsters so identified. And it's even less of a secret that more than a few psychologists and attorneys have earned a nice living by helping parents advance these demands upon the school system.

This is akin to pharmaceutical companies that appear to dream up new ailments that their pricey miracle drugs might cure—ailments that people sometimes didn't even know they had until they learned about them on TV or the internet. There's public money out there to capture, after all, and when all is said and done special ed is essentially an entitlement.

None of which is to dismiss the legitimate claims of youngsters with true disabilities to some extra help with their schoolwork, and I do not doubt that the *Houston Chronicle*

(like other investigators), had it kept digging, would have come up with more heartstring-tugging instances of arbitrary and wrongful denial of special education services.

If you train a different lens upon all this, however, you realize that you're looking at a badly messed-up system, one that privileges some kids over others, that extends rights to some citizens that others don't have, that invites finagling by both seekers and suppliers of education services (and countless intermediaries), and that ends up being costlier than it needs to be, not to mention sitting substantially beyond the reach of policymakers tasked with apportioning scarce education dollars across multiple legitimate causes, needs, and priorities.

It's also, in my view, an antiquated system that's long overdue for a thoroughgoing overhaul. At a time when, assisted by many new technologies, the concept of "personalized learning" for every child is on the agenda of many educators and philanthropists, why do we persist in personalizing the educational experiences of some kids while batch-processing everybody else? At a time when other federal and state policies are focused on achievement, school results, and the narrowing of learning gaps, why do we carve out a huge subpart of K-12 education for a program that's still centered on inputs and services? At a time when revving the engines of upward mobility is among the great domestic challenges that America faces, why do we continue with practices that are especially susceptible to manipulation by canny upper-middle-class families pursuing advantages for their own children as well as by just about everyone else who in some way benefits from the

maintenance and expansion of the current arrangement?

Although many states have special education laws of their own—a few of them as innovative as Florida's McKay Scholarship Program—and other federal statutes also influence how society does (and doesn't) treat disabled individuals both in school and beyond, the principal policy engine in the K-12 realm remains the federal IDEA statute, which has not been reauthorized since 2004 and—as many others have noted—is due for a top-to-bottom review.

Which I fear it isn't going to get because everybody is scared to touch special education, much less fundamentally alter it. Elected officials do not want to be accosted by the angry parents of kids with (or whose parents are sure they have) disabilities. Nobody wants pictures of plaintive children in wheelchairs to appear on TV or YouTube. Everybody is super worried about autism and ADHD (radically over-diagnosed though the latter appears to be—with pharmaceutical companies again minting money from it). Multiple adult interests now benefit from keeping special ed the way it is—and continuing to expand it. Insofar as policy analysts, academics, and think tanks pay any attention to the topic, they almost always do so within the fundamental structures and parameters of the forty-plus-year-old policy regime that was inaugurated with President Ford's signature. Nobody wants to get outside this box nowadays, not even the kinds of private funders that generally support fresh education policy thinking.

Fordham tackled this in a big way back in 2001. A federal commission did much the same the following year. Since then, there have been

sundry efforts to ensure that kids with disabilities—and their schools—are subject to the accountability expectations of NCLB and, most recently, ESSA. This has not gone well, however, and such issues as how to accommodate these students on state assessments—and which among them to excuse from those assessments—have been big, sore, contentious issues. Yet little fresh thinking about the fundamentals of special ed has taken place in the past decade, save for the indefatigable Miriam Kurtzig Freedman, whose forthcoming book, *Special Education 2.0: Breaking Taboos to Build a New Education Law*, will outline a new way forward.

It would be nice to think that Congress might eventually steel itself to tackle the rethink that IDEA needs, as it finally did with ESEA/NCLB. However, I'm not holding my breath.

Meanwhile, two cheers for the *Houston Chronicle* for surfacing this problem in Texas—but let's also choke out a word of understanding for Texas for trying, however clumsily, even in some ways cruelly, to live with a federal law that isn't working at all the way it should but that nobody seems ready to fix. ■

Originally published on edexcellence.net.



Chester E. Finn, Jr. is a former professor of education, an educational policy analyst, and a former United States Assistant Secretary of Education. He is currently the president emeritus of the nonprofit

Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Washington, D.C. He is also a Fellow of the International Academy of Education, an Adjunct Fellow at the Hudson Institute, and a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution where he chairs the Koret Task Force on K-12 Education.

8 Things Twitter Savvy Educators Do to Improve Learning



When it comes to useful PD, more educators are turning to Twitter to grow learning networks in 140 characters

These days, it's hard to meet an educator who hasn't heard of Twitter. But how many use it? While some might question if the social media platform can help with professional development (PD), there are others who know just how much potential rests in 140 characters.

Three Twitter experts, Jessica Raleigh, Kyle Calderwood, and Susan Bearden, offered guidance to those seeking to expand their Twitter horizons.

Using hashtags with every tweet helps build up your community.

"When you're using a hashtag regularly, you get to know other people using the same tag, and it becomes part of a community," Raleigh said. "If you have that community and you use a hashtag, you're going to get responses from that community. You get to know people."

Lurk to learn. "Lurking is learning," Raleigh said. "The idea of lurking is that you're watching, but you're not necessarily engaging in the conversation. [I] don't encourage you to lurk all the time; we have so much to learn and everyone's voice is important. But sometimes it's just nice to see what others are sharing and gather that information for yourself."

Take control of your school or district story. "Use hashtags to build school community. You tell your own story; let your school tell its

story," said Kyle Calderwood, technology coordinator at New Jersey's Tuckerton Elementary School. "If you're an administrator, start your own hashtag and tell parents what you're doing."

Don't just jump on the bandwagon when it comes to the idea of edu-celebrities. "Don't get sucked into the black hole of edu-celebrity status," Raleigh said. "When you look for people to follow, find those who are genuine."

Agree to disagree. "Find some people who have completely opposite viewpoints from you," Raleigh advised. "When you find people who will push you out of your comfort zones, that's good. Find your tribe, but when you create your PLN, find people who will push you and really force you to think and apply what you're learning. It's OK to disagree. Sometimes on Twitter I think people are uncomfortable disagreeing. Be polite, but... you can disagree. It's OK to respectfully disagree with people. That's where the really good learning happens."

Ensure your tweets reach stakeholders who don't use Twitter.

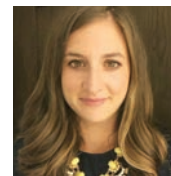
"Using Fast Follow, parents and stakeholders who aren't on Twitter can receive a text message version of a tweet," said Susan Bearden, director of information technology at Holy Trinity Episcopal Academy in Florida and creator of TweechMe, an app that helps educators leverage

Twitter for professional development. With Fast Follow, users simply send a text that says "Follow @Handle" to receive future tweets.

Don't underestimate the value of a Twitter mentoring program. "The NT2T (New Teachers to Twitter) chat was created to help other educators get started as they use Twitter," Calderwood said. "It features different themes each week, such as the role of librarians or helping students boost engagement."

Model digital citizenship. "We're teaching kids to build good digital citizenship skills before they're actually using the platforms," Bearden said. "From a digital citizenship perspective, using social media as a school or a district or a teacher can be a great way to role model appropriate social media use. Our kids have no shortage of lousy role models when it comes to social media. We as educators have a moral responsibility to model appropriate social media use for our students." Once educators start using social media professionally, they begin to think about how they're using it, how they appear online, and they begin leveraging those tools in positive ways. ■

Read the full article on eschoolnews.com.



Laura Devaney is Director of News for eSchool Media. Mom of 2, runner, popcorn lover, Boxer owner, and home improvement enthusiast.

Member Spotlight: Thelma and Louise Head to Nashville

The National Charter School Conference, hosted by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, is held every year in an effort to deliver exceptional learning and networking opportunities for every participant and to celebrate the diverse group of education innovators, policymakers, and business leaders that comprise the public charter school community. This journal is a highlight of the firsthand accounts of AAE member conference goers Peggy Downs and Susan Goers' trip to the 2016 conference held June 26th to 29th of this past year. **Registration for the 2017 Charter Conference in Washington, D.C. begins this month!**

June 24th: Susan leaves Utah to head to Peggy's home in Colorado. Sue and Peggy met in 2010 as they began working together at Good Foundations Academy (GFA) serving grades K-6. Peggy was the director and Susan was a 6th-grade teacher. They served together at GFA for four years.

June 25th: The two head out with caffeine in hand, in a sweet sporty red 2014 Nissan Altima borrowed from Susan's son-in-law. Time flew across the country as the two shared stories, some funny, some serious, about what had taken place since they last saw each other.

Registration was quick and orderly. Donning their name tags they were directed to the block party to welcome the 4,600 participants.

Among the treats available to welcome them were chocolate-covered popcorn, BBQ sliders, and corn salad. Elvis and Dolly were present to boogie on down to the live music from the local bands while most participants wandered looking for people they knew! Quickly they ran into AAE's Rena Youngblood and enjoyed the entertainment for the rest of the evening.

June 26th: The conference opened with two little gentlemen singing a rap about charters that was excellently delivered. Their hilarious emcee Roland Martin, from News One Now, was determined to wake them up and get them going, took the stage next. His use of humor and sarcasm drove them to their feet and prepared them to hear the good news proclaimed by Nina Rees when she took the stage. The enthusiasm and excitement that she brought to the house was addicting and they were prepared to head to their first breakout sessions to learn and network.

Susan busied herself with the ten mistakes that she hopes to not make in her new charter school. Elements like unknown expectations, unwritten policies, not onboarding new teachers

correctly, lack of motivation and retention tools, helping teachers to find a work/life balance, termination training and termination policies, and various other items that could cause issues with a charter just starting up.

Peggy attended Dream Team: the five dysfunctions of a team. She learned about these dysfunctions, which are absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment in leaders, avoidance of accountability, and being inattentive to results.

Susan found herself in The Three Phases of New Schools: Application, Pre-opening, and First Year. The strategies of the presenters were amazing as they broke off into the three groups and traveled the room to answer questions and give advice on the next steps of the process, or what to be aware of as time went forward.

June 27th: Susan's workshop started bright and early 8:15 a.m. and ran to nearly 1:00 p.m. The Together Leader was a fast-paced workshop attempting to help the "whaters" and the "wheners" find mid-ground in order to find a more organized life and have balance between career and family. Participants walked away with valuable tools for organizing their lives in such a way as to make themselves much more productive. It was well worth the fee to get the books and templates offered.

Peggy attended a leadership session on Good to Great. Typical good-to-great strategies were discussed and shared, and the conversation was a good refresher for her. Peggy enjoyed networking with other charter school



What Makes a Great Science Teacher?

leaders at the table and traded business cards with several. After that session, Peggy went on to learn about Empowering Students with Disabilities to Succeed on Standardized Tests. This session showcased four different schools and the research that had been conducted to learn how they had achieved higher achievement scores for students with disabilities. The research identified the key study skills and elements of school culture that had led to this accomplishment. As the director of a school where the vision is to develop a fully inclusive learning environment, Peggy was very interested to learn these strategies to see if this success could be replicated in her school.

June 28th: The third day of the conference found them attending a final morning session before the closing sessions. They thoroughly enjoyed finding themselves in Connecting the Dots, using data to tell your story, where a longtime colleague of Peggy's from Peak to Peak Charter was on the panel. Peggy was a founding parent of the school when it opened in 2000, and friends with the current director who was also a parent at the time. They took extraneous notes while learning about tools that they could use to communicate our school's successes with their parents more clearly, using visuals and data to get our mission and vision across to the public.

June 29th: Six a.m. came early the next day as the two headed out for the first leg of the trip back to Colorado and Utah.

July 1st: Waking with an adrenaline rush, at 6:00 a.m. Sue quickly bid her friend farewell, and they made an agreement to make a habit of catching up and traveling together. Two who loved adventure and road trips, they will look forward to the next time they can discover new places and experiences together.

Sue hit the road and made it home to Utah by 2:00 p.m.

With many thank-you notes to write, and plenty of reading and planning to begin, they both left the conference eager they're already looking forward to next year's conference in DC! ■



Go to conference.publiccharters.org/2017/registration to register at the early bird rate through December 19th!

After recently winning the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, I was asked what makes a great science teacher. Wow, what a question! Not sure I can sum it all up in one article because there is so much that goes into being a great teacher.

First and foremost, I should start by saying that great science teachers are keenly aware that they don't know everything, and research on teaching and learning is constantly yielding vast amounts of data that should cause us to reflect daily upon our teaching practices.

Great science teachers—and all great teachers for that matter—are willing to grow as professionals and try new things. Parents, administrators, and education stakeholders shouldn't worry too much about the teacher who makes a mistake because they are willing to step outside of their comfort zone and push their students. In fact, this should be encouraged!

We should, however, worry about the teacher who claims to have it all figured out and is unwilling to change their teaching pedagogy regardless of what the research says about the way students learn. These teachers don't want to rock the boat, are satisfied with the status quo, and go about their business as usual.

We are dealing with a generation of students who are facing this rapidly changing world and that change dictates that we remain flexible and open to new and even uncomfortable ideas. Great science teachers understand this and that is why they are beginning to focus less on content and instead focus on how to develop critically thinking students who understand the scientific process, which is an invaluable decision-making tool.

Our students today have to listen to a cascade of voices and opinions via family, friends, and social media. It

is wise then for great science educators to teach them how to evaluate these voices and opinions and to help students make claims based on the weight of evidence before arriving at a decision. This is not just a scientific skill; it is a life skill.

Great teachers want their students to wait to make a claim until they have had a chance to analyze the data and the patterns within that data. Great teachers want their students to understand that there might be multiple ways they can test and solve difficult problems. Great teachers want their students to evaluate the differing perspectives brought forth by a wide variety of stakeholders and make sure that their decisions are based on broad scientific consensus and not public opinion or past cultural norms.

Here's what great science teachers are...

- In order to develop these problem-solving skills, great science teachers are not going to give students problems that have a predetermined pathway and a single answer already in mind.
- Great science teachers are not going to dismiss creativity and ingenuity in favor of cookie-cutter labs that only measure the student's ability to follow directions rather than their ability to design unique ways to test problems.

- Great science teachers are not opposed to progress; they are opposed to blind progress that results from narrow-minded thinking.
- Great science teachers are not opposed to hands-on learning; they are opposed to activities that are simply fun or entertaining but don't really result in any sort of conceptual understanding or change.
- Great science teachers look to identify student misconceptions and help them think about previously held understandings concerning the way the natural world operates.
- Great science teachers are always conscious of a student's zone of proximal development and seek to push their students out of their comfort zone so that real learning can take place. We don't grow unless we are uncomfortable.

- Great science teachers seek to have their students develop models (no, a model is not something that can be eaten later) to test and understand new phenomenon.
- Great science teachers ask more questions that lead to more questions and refuse to just give out answers and teacher-centered directions.
- Great science teachers don't place a worksheet in front of students and call it "science."
- Great science teachers are coaches, facilitators, mentors, and leaders of student-led discussion and student-generated research.

- Great science teachers ask why and how questions constantly.
- Great science teachers lead students to develop claims, evidence, and

reasoning to support their position.

- Great science teachers invite students to argue with their peers, be critical of information, and don't shy away from controversial topics for the sake of politics.
- Great science teachers make real world connections for students, and invite them to pursue careers that will solve the difficult problems we face.
- Great science teachers encourage their students to fail so that they can eventually come to a solution.

Great science teachers are many things, but they are definitely not stagnant. I love what I do, I hope that I can continue to pursue the excellence demanded by this profession. I strongly believe that students need great science teachers more than ever.

We have huge problems when it comes to complex issues such as climate change, global health issues, energy, infrastructure, and cyber security.

As a society, we need creative students who are willing to move outside the box that might have been constructed for them and pursue solutions that were never even imagined prior to their generation.

I am proud to inspire these students and I hope that a new generation of STEM teachers will rise up and take the torch so that we can continue to hope for a better future. ■



Jason George, AAE/NWPE member, is a teacher at Vision Charter School in Caldwell, Idaho. He has been recognized as one of Idaho's top secondary science educators.



Education Matters is an exclusive publication for members of AAE and its state chapters. This publication is brought to you by the Association of American Educators Foundation (AAEF).
aaeteachers.org • editor@aaeteachers.org • 800.704.7799



Gary Beckner, *Executive Editor*
Alexandra Freeze, *Managing Editor*
M. Alana Welch, *Coordinating Editor*

Debbie Brown, *Editorial Assistant*
Diane Meyer, *Editorial Assistant*

AAE Teacher Survey of the Month

Did you know that AAE membership includes TWICE the coverage of the nation's largest teachers union liability insurance policy?

- ▶ Take this one-question survey at tinyurl.com/aaeNov16Survey today and be entered to win an AAE prize pack—just for letting us know! You can also scan the QR code to take this survey on your phone.



Do you know a teacher who would make a great member?

Invite them to visit aaeteachers.org/membership today to learn more about the nonunion choice for educators!

