

The Abell Report

What we think about, and what we'd like you to think about

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Special Education in the Baltimore City High Schools: Perspectives, Challenges, Recommendations

ABELL SALUTES: The Baltimore Scholars program of Johns Hopkins University, for changing lives by changing the rules

Twenty-three students are attending Johns Hopkins this year whose life circumstances suggest they never expected to be there. They are Baltimore Scholars, students living in Baltimore City who find themselves the fortunate beneficiaries of the university's unique scholarship program, an outgrowth of its commitment, first, to improving the quality of life in Baltimore City, and second, to providing diversity to its student body.

Although measuring the success of the first objective may be vague—mixed as it is with many forces moving in confluence -- data to confirm the success of the second is clear.

According to Dr. Matthew Crenson, academic director of the program, for each of the three years prior to the program's beginning, applications to Johns Hopkins by Baltimore City public school students averaged 37; the number admitted, 11; the number actually enrolled, four. In 2005, the first year of the program, applications soared to 121; admitted, 33; enrolled,

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At stake: the education due every student; the taxpayer dollars to support it; the viability of Baltimore City's work force.

Special education in Baltimore City—the educational program for students with certain mental, emotional, or physical disabilities—has been a nagging, intractable, and very public problem for at least 25 years. Community leaders have been mindful of the inequities that undermine the education of students with disabilities and continue to address the problem. Many solutions have been tried, and some are still in the introductory stages. This article provides a picture of special education in Baltimore City's high schools and compares Baltimore's efforts outcomes with those of other cities. It also introduces the perspectives of those involved in special education and makes recommendations.

To the students and their parents, special education is a right—a claim on civic resources for an equal education under the law; to the community, it is an obligation to ensure fairness and an opportunity to level the playing field so that more and more students with disabilities can join the community of productive adults.

Starting with this year's freshman, high school students must pass Maryland's new High School Assessments (HSA) in order to graduate. As a result, the majority of Baltimore's students with disabilities who would otherwise graduate may be denied diplomas.

Shortcomings in achievement among special education students are a pressing concern.

BCPSS is not alone in struggling to improve the performance of its special education students. Low test scores and graduation rates are the norm in urban districts across the country, and no urban school district seems to know to improve these problems without more resources and better research. This article takes a close look at how special education in Baltimore City's high schools is performing and what barriers and needs stand in the way of improvement as a first step in moving forward.

BCPSS has made more progress than is commonly acknowledged in meeting the requirements of the long-standing Vaughn G. case.

The Vaughn G. lawsuit began in 1984 on behalf of special education students in Baltimore City who were not receiving special education services required by law. As part of the ongoing monitoring of BCPSS' compliance with federal and state laws and Court decrees, the Court adopted 15 outcomes in 2000 to measure BCPSS' progress in providing special education.

BCPSS' failure to meet some of these outcomes has made the local headlines again and again. Yet, in the

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past five years, BCPSS has made significant progress on twelve of these fifteen measures, which has not been widely reported. Three outcomes—graduation rates, dropout rates, and the provision of certain special education services like speech therapy and counseling—continue to be major challenges. In August 2005, the Court reported that over half of special education students last year had interruptions in special education services. This finding of failure to comply on one of the fifteen outcomes prompted the Court to give the Maryland State Department of Education substantial control over special education in Baltimore City.

Compliance with the Vaughn G. special education mandates deserves attention, but compliance alone has not been enough to improve achievement for the city's special education students.

There are significant gaps in the numbers of regular education and special education students who stay in school and who graduate in BCPSS, and these gaps are growing.

For special education students, the prospect of finishing high school has grown dimmer. In 2005, roughly three out of ten special education students graduated from high school with a diploma, about half the percentage of students who are not in special education. In addition, by the end of their fourth year of high school, 17% of special education students dropout, while 10% of regular education do. Urban public school systems around the country also report a similar difficulty in reducing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates for special education students.

High school special education students' achievement on statewide tests is shockingly low, yet no other urban district is doing a significantly better job.

Both regular education and special education students have shown improvement on the Maryland State Assessment (MSA)—the tests used to measure how well schools are educating their students—since these tests were introduced. Nonetheless, 2% or fewer of high school special education students in BCPSS met MSA expectations in English II or geometry in 2005, and the already enormous gaps between regular and special education students' scores continue to widen.

The picture is similar for the state's High School Assessments (HSA), but the stakes are far higher. Starting with this year's ninth graders, students must pass these exams to graduate from high school. The most recent HSA pass rates show that fewer than 2% of special education students passed either the algebra or English HSA.

In urban schools districts across the country, large gaps between the achievement of regular education and special education students are the norm. No large urban school districts are significantly more successful than Baltimore at educating high school students with disabilities. For example, in Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland, and Oakland, about 40% more regular education students than special education students passed their state's English graduation test the first time they took the test.

A combination of unmet needs and shortcomings in special education has led to high school special education students not achieving as much as they should.

First, teaching is not keeping up with changing high schools.

In Baltimore and across the country, more special education students are being taught in classes with regular education students rather than being pulled out of class for special education services or assigned to separate classes only for students with disabilities. Almost three-quarters of high school special education students in Baltimore now spend 40% or more of their time in the general education classroom. Yet the effects of inclusion—both for special education students and their regular education classmates—are unclear. If some students with disabilities are in regular classrooms when they really need more individualized settings, their education and the education of their general education classmates could suffer.

While Baltimore City high school teachers are generally supportive of the idea of including special education students in general education classrooms, regular education teachers lack the training to deal with this change, and special education teachers have little opportunity to help regular education. In many schools, special education teachers only have the time to stop by regular education classes once or twice a week, even though that is where special education students spend most of their time.

Another change in the city's high schools is the creation of small high schools—the new Innovation high schools run by outside operators, and neighborhood high schools that have been restructured into smaller schools. These schools should provide an opportunity for all high school students to benefit from a more personalized setting. However, small schools do not

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have the resources and staff to serve special education students well. For example, of the 15 BCPSS high schools with 50 or fewer special education students, 10 have only a half-time or one full-time special education teacher. Without enough special education teachers, small schools simply do not have the knowledge or the flexibility to meet the needs of their special education students. This is a lost opportunity.

High schools struggle because they lack information about what works in the classroom or about individual students' needs.

Teachers and principals reported a need for math and reading programs that are proven to boost student achievement as well as strategies to help manage student behavior. Good research is available in both areas, but staff did not know where to find it. In other areas, schools struggle to find information about how to improve high school special education because the research simply does not exist. Most special education research is for elementary schools, not high schools. Districts and schools have to make their best educated guesses about what works.

Schools also say that Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), the main source of information about students' abilities and needs, are often inaccurate, out-of-date, or simply too vague to be useful. When the roadmap for a student's education is wrong, schools cannot be expected to help students get where they need to be.

Special education students do not have enough access to programs to help them succeed in school or life after school.

Special education students also lack the resources and information that they

need to get the most from their education. Speech therapists and other specialized staff are hard to find, so students do not get all the services that they need. Guides for choosing high schools do not make it clear that special education students can apply to any high school in the district, so students may think that certain options are not available to them. The number of spaces in Career and Technology Education programs is dwindling, yet these programs are often the best path to self-sufficiency. Special education students often do not have the basic opportunities that they need to thrive.

Urban districts around the country face the same problems that plague special education in Baltimore City's high schools.

No urban districts are doing much better than Baltimore in serving their special education students, and none appear to know how to do a better job without more resources and more research. Other school districts struggle to address the same issues that Baltimore faces. For example, a Boston Public Schools report on the achievement gap between regular and special education students found that an insufficient number of qualified teachers and the fact that "special education instruction is today where regular education instruction was several years ago" were contributing to the achievement gap. In New York City, a group of outside researchers found that the school system does not provide enough teacher training to ensure that special education students are exposed to the material that they are expected to know—and that regular education students have access to.

Recommendations

While there are no clear-cut solutions to improve high school special education, educators, administrators

and policymakers should not conclude that nothing can be done for Baltimore City's special education students. Rather, it means that improving special education is difficult and that school systems must often rely on best guesses about what will work based on broader findings or organizing principles. For example, there might not be a specific well-researched program for special education training for high school teachers, but there is clear evidence that, in general, on-going training is better than one-time events.

Based on research findings, other districts' experiences, and Baltimore City's specific needs, the district should consider the following recommendations:

Convene a Series of Discussions on Better Serving Special Education Students

Many people interviewed for this report feel that answers are still needed to key questions about the purposes of high school reform, restructuring, the development of Innovation High Schools, and the place of students with disabilities in this work. It could be very helpful to convene a series of discussions to reevaluate and clarify the purposes and goals of high school reform that include district staff, principals, teachers, parents, advocates and other stakeholders. In addition, new partners such as the special education management team from the Maryland State Department of Education could contribute their expertise and vision for the district.

Re-examine the Special Education Staffing Plan

Most high schools that enroll fewer than 50 special education students have one special education teacher and an instructional associate one day a week. This appears insufficient to complete

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paperwork, provide adequate time and expertise to teachers across, and lead professional development. Schools may need a minimum number of staff if they enroll any special education students.

Provide Better Training for Teachers

One of the clearest needs of the city's high schools is more and better professional development in teaching special education students, both for special education teachers and especially for regular education teachers. As Dr. Tom Hehir, former director of special education in Boston, Chicago, and the U. S. Department of Education said, "to fix special education, you've got to start with regular education."

Continue to Improve Reading and Mathematics Instruction and Supports

Additional guidance on and support for research-based programs in math and reading would greatly benefit school staff, who often asked, "What works?" This may require substantial investment in materials, technology, professional development, and reading specialists to help diagnosis and assess students. Programs that work are available.

Step-up Preparation for the High School Assessments

Additional, immediate attention must be given to improving special education student performance on the High School Assessments. Given low pass rates and the risk of many fewer students graduating, developing a comprehensive set of programs, materials, and training should be a high priority for the district.

Provide More Comprehensive Transition Programs for Students with Disabilities

Improving the transition from mid-

dle to high school and from high school to the postsecondary world is necessary to ensure success in high school and in life. Some improvements might include a mentoring program for incoming ninth graders, more thorough IEP reviews before students leave middle schools, having students spend time in their new high schools before beginning ninth grade, providing a variety of programs to meet the highly varied needs of students with disabilities, and providing a transition facilitator—an adult who can advocate for a student and make sure that the steps in the transition plan are happening—so that students stay track with their goals.

Upgrade the Data System for Tracking Special Education Information

Research on special education data management suggests that upgrading the city's special education tracking system would likely solve some of the district's data management and compliance problems and free staff time and resources for student instruction and services.

Support the Adoption of a Behavior and Classroom Management Program at the High School Level

A classroom management program could lessen the number of serious behavioral problems, which disproportionately involve special education students and lead to serious consequences such as expulsion or suspension. It should also increase the amount of instructional time; staff report that the range of classroom and behavioral management techniques used in a school leads to the loss of significant instructional time as students adjust to the different styles during the first few months of the school year.

The Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program is well-researched and has shown results

in Maryland high schools. It would also provide consistency across the Baltimore school system since it is already being implemented in several elementary and middle schools.

Improve Communication about Resources and Priorities

Some of the concerns of schools and staff could be allayed through better communication about the availability of resources and about priorities. School staff often do not know what help the district can provide. Misunderstandings about issues such as adding services to a student's Individualized Education Program have led to recriminations and damaged working relationships. Clear information and more frequent communication about resources, needs, and goals would help to make sure that more opportunities are taken advantage of.

Develop an Online Forum to Share Resources and Experience

An online forum for teachers to locate resources for special education and share best practices and experiences would help meet important needs identified by staff. There is evidence from the United Kingdom that such a forum would be a useful supplement to professional development, classroom practice, and community-building among teachers.

Conclusion

Blame, underresourced programs, defeatism, and a focus on compliance at the expense of instruction—none of these will improve special education in Baltimore's high schools. To meet increased expectations and fulfill the community's responsibility to high special education students will require more resources; better communication among the district, schools, staff, parents, and students; and a willingness to

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take some risks. This study is neither the final word on the state of special education in Baltimore City's high schools nor does it provide the solutions to all the needs that the district has. However, it may provide a useful starting point to aid those who care about special education in Baltimore's high schools as they move forward with plans and discussions.

Supporting data available, The Abell Foundation, abell@abell.org

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23 -- about six times as many. "Of those enrolled," Dr. Crenson says, "about half were non-white—mostly African American, one was Asian."

To create the pool of applicants, Hopkins' admissions officers visit the public high schools in Baltimore City. The officers talk with guidance counselors and to the students recommended to them. They then determine if the applicant has been a resident of the city and attending a Baltimore city public school (both) for at least three years, and if he or she meets Hopkins standards for admission. Those admitted as Baltimore Scholars qualify for free tuition, and more money is available to them for other costs on a needs-basis.

Demetreus Gregg is an African American Baltimore Scholar now in his freshman year in the program at Hopkins. He was attending City College and in the second semester of his junior year, in a routine meeting with his college advisor, David Gibson, he was appraised of the Baltimore Scholars' program. Gregg felt, and with good reason, that as daunting as the goal was, he had a chance of reaching it. He was president of the City College student body, had excellent grades as an International Baccalaureate student, and served as student representative on the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners. "I found Hopkins to be a community of scholars, and though there were differences among us students, in terms of race, creed, and color, it was a strong, shared desire to learn that brought us together. The school arranges for the Scholars to share dinners and get-togethers. they do whatever it takes to provide for a student's comfort level. I encourage high school student not to be intimidated by lack of money, and the odds against being accepted, and to go for it. I went for it." And, it needs to be added, got it.

The Abell Foundation salutes the Johns Hopkins University's "Baltimore Scholars" program: Dr. William R. Brody, President of Johns Hopkins University; Dr. John Latting, Dr. Matthew Crenson, Dean Paula Burger, and William Conley, who made it all happen, and who changed lives by changing the rules.

Dr. Crenson says, "Although it is too early in the program to say how well the program will do in the future, it does appear to be getting bigger all the time. The word is out."