

## OUR VOICES

## EDITORIAL

**GREETINGS:** Westfield Middle School Principal Ed Mendoza greeted special education student Talina Velasquez, who was new to the school. A shortage of special education teachers threatens these students' chances to learn and succeed in school.



Star File Photo (2005)

# Special kids, urgent needs

## Push for change so students can succeed.

### Our position:

More special education teachers are needed to give many special education students the special attention they deserve.

Contrary to what you might think, most special education students don't suffer from Down syndrome or other severe cognitive disabilities. Nor are they unable to learn in school or pass the ISTEP-Plus exams.

Most have been diagnosed with "specific learning disabilities" such as dyslexia. Others suffer from speech impediments or behavior difficulties that stem from problems at home.

In many cases, special ed students can perform well in school — if they are taught by trained professionals. Unfortunately, there's a shortage of special ed teachers.

Concerns over special education have grown over the past decade, as the No Child Left Behind Act and its accountability requirements force school districts to show whether they are giving at-risk students, including those in special ed, the attention they need to succeed.

Many school officials — across the nation and the state — are concerned that the requirement to test even the most severely disabled students makes educators look bad. Some local and state educators want to lower expectations for special ed students. Considering the evidence found by The Star, lower expectations seem counter-productive.

◆ **Too many special ed students are dropping out of school.** Forty-nine percent of special ed students ages 14 to 21 who left school during the 2004-05 school year — 5,200 young Hoosiers — dropped out, according to the U.S. Department of Education. Only 28 percent of special ed students nationwide dropped out that year.

The state trails the nation in graduating special ed students. Only 40 percent of special ed students who left school graduated compared with a 55 percent national average.

◆ **Blacks, already more likely to land in special ed than whites, fare worse than others in those settings.**

### WHY HOOSIERS NEED CHANGE

Twenty-nine of Indiana's 92 counties have populations less than 30,000. But they have the same wide array of township, municipal and county governments as those much larger.

— Star report

★ If you know of reasons for government reform, send them to Jim Herman at jim.herman@indy.com or Indianapolis Star, 307 N. Pennsylvania St., Indianapolis, IN 46202.

### ONLINE: CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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Sixty percent of black special education students — 1,400 youngsters — dropped out that year, compared with 47 percent of whites. Nationwide, only 35 percent of black special ed students dropped out.

Graduation rates are even more abysmal. Twenty-seven percent of blacks leaving special ed in 2005 earned a diploma, compared to 43 percent of whites. Thirty-nine percent of black special ed students nationwide graduated in that period.

Blacks are twice as likely as whites to spend more than 60 percent of their time in special ed classes. They get fewer opportunities to achieve academically.

◆ **Most special education students aren't suffering from mental retardation or other cognitive disorders.** Mentally retarded students make up just 13 percent of Indiana's special education population between the ages of six and 21. While they make up a larger portion of the state's special ed population than the national average, they aren't the majority.

Forty percent of special ed students are primarily diagnosed with "specific learning disabilities," a wide-range of disorders that include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Another 24 percent are primarily diagnosed with speech impairments caused by brain injury and such birth defects as cleft palates. Students suffering emotional disturbances account for the rest.

These students can learn, notes Erin Dillon of the Education Sector, an educational think tank, in a recent report. Sixty-nine percent of third-grade special ed students who didn't need accommodations passed the math portion of the ISTEP-Plus exam last year, barely trailing students in regular classes.

For the most part, this can be done while still mainstreaming students into regular classes to avoid the stigma of special ed labeling. Additional help, including reading specialists and counselors, is key to helping those students achieve. The use of individualized learning plans, mandated by the federal Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, can also help parents and teachers help students succeed.

Sadly, a shortage of special education teachers, especially those trained in handling emotional problems, means that students aren't getting the specialized instruction they need. So classes end up being taught by instructors with little or no special ed experience.

Another problem is the over-diagnosis of learning disabilities, especially among young black and white males. The lack of intense early remediation to deal with achievement gaps is a culprit. Cultural differences between students and the teaching corps, which consists mostly of white females, also doesn't help.

Black males, who made up just 30 percent of Indianapolis Public Schools' overall population in 2004-05, accounted for 39 percent of those diagnosed with a learning disability and 53 percent of the emotionally disturbed population.

Solving these problems will require systemic changes in the public education system:

- ◆ Improve pay for special ed jobs, along with merit bonuses to attract talented teachers.
- ◆ Provide specialized training for all instructors to sensitize them to the needs of special ed students and help streamline them into regular classrooms.
- ◆ Be more discerning in diagnosing special education needs. This can be helped by luring more males, especially black men, into teaching.

There are some special ed students, notably those with mental retardation, whose ability to learn will always be limited.

But a large pool of students has the potential to do great things, given the opportunity.

That's why it's so important to address this need — a need that lies at the root of many learning issues facing educators.

The students deserve better.



DEBRA J. SAUNDERS

## Democrats learn GOP tricks

Last year, congressional Democrats bemoaned the GOP's "culture of corruption." Rightly so, after 12 years holding the reins, Republican leaders had been corrupted by power. They encouraged their membership to burn through billions of taxpayers' dollars by passing "earmarks" to fund local pet projects with federal dollars. They neutered the ethics committee and got way too cozy with now-convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff. By November, two members — Bob Ney of Ohio and Duke Cunningham of California — had pleaded guilty, and American voters revolted by handing the leadership to Democrats.

To borrow from the rock band the Who: Meet the new boss, same as the old boss. As this new Congress goes into recess, the Democrats don't have the baggage of entrenched Repubs in 2006, but they are well on their way.

Last year, Rep. Nancy Pelosi promised to drain the GOP swamp and reform earmark spending. This year, the House speaker argued that the \$22 billion extra that Democrats want to spend on top of the Bush administration's budget represents "a very small difference."

This so-called reform Congress hasn't matched Republicans on the earmark front yet, but the Democratic-led Congress is warming to earmarks.

The swamp isn't likely to be drained with Pelosi throwing her support behind Rep. Jack Murtha of Pennsylvania, a Prince of Earmarks who sponsored \$163 million worth of earmarks in seven spending bills this year, according to Taxpayers for Common Sense.

Worse, the so-called Democratic reform that was supposed to discourage pork spending by making earmarks more transparent now seems likely to fuel the Dems' spending spree. Rep. Nancy Boyda, D-Kansas, told The New York Times, "My guess is that next year I'm going to be putting in more earmarks."

As for the five-year, \$286-million pork-rich farm bill passed by the House, consider the words of Rep. Jim Cooper, D-Tenn., who told Roll Call that Pelosi "had to buck every editorial page in America on the farm bill" — like that was a good thing.

Don't expect much fiscal responsibility from a Congress dedicated to hiding from the public the cost of its programs. At least the Senate energy bill raised fuel-efficiency standards to 35 miles per gallon for all cars by 2020.

But the House passed an energy bill that did not touch car mileage — drivers and Detroit Dems might not like that — while requiring that utilities produce 15 percent of their power from renewable sources by 2020. Brilliant. Voters will blame their higher energy bills not on Congress, but on utilities.

The House voted to expand federal health care for an additional 5 million children, by taxing smokers an additional 45 cents per pack. Same as the old boss: More government, and you don't have to pay for it.

Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., likes to say that "earmarks are the gateway drug that leads to spending addiction in Congress." It seems as though members of both parties either can't help themselves, or they are convinced bad governance is what voters want.

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### The wrong message

For a politician renowned for his deft public relations touch, Mayor Bart Peterson hasn't done a good job on that front these days. From failing to fully explain why the city needed to pass the 65 percent increase in the county-option income tax last month — and failing to tie that hike to the budget — to last week's budget presentation to the City-County Council that was marred by complaints that he packed the council chambers with his supporters, the mayor has been ham-fisted in dealing with the public.

Considering that Peterson employs three press officers and keeps two former press secretaries, public relations should be a strong suit.

Perhaps he needs to look at ways to buff up his image. It is an election year, after all.

### Nightlines

**Conan O'Brien:** The New York Times reduced the size of its paper. They reduced the width by an inch and a half. The news was announced with the headline, "Big News at New York Tim."

◆ Potential-for-candidate Fred Thompson is now busy defending his much younger wife. In a recent interview, he said all criticism of his wife should be directed at him. As a result, conservative groups told Thompson he's been showing too much cleavage.

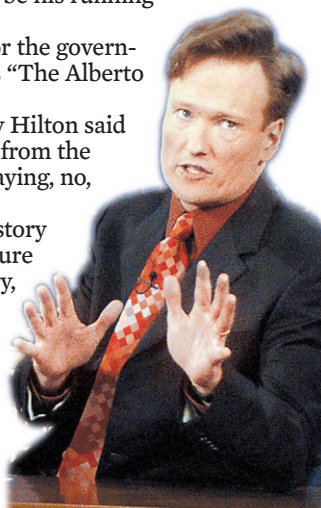
**Jay Leno:** Congratulations to Matt Damon. His movie "The Bourne Ultimatum" had the biggest movie opening ever in the month of August. It made \$70 million. Today, Sen. John McCain asked Matt Damon to be his running mate.

◆ If you haven't seen it, it's about a guy who works for the government but can't remember his past. The original title was "The Alberto Gonzales Story."

◆ In a recent interview with People magazine, Kathy Hilton said that her daughter Paris Hilton might have gotten a rash from the sheets in her cell. Today the sheets issued a statement saying, no, they got the rash from Paris Hilton.

**Jimmy Kimmel:** Earlier this year, there was a strange story about Keith Richards. He claims he once snorted a mixture of cocaine and his dead father's ashes. That was the story, but he denied it. Now, though, he's saying he did snort his dad; he did not mix him with some cocaine. He only snorted his dad. Stars. They're just like us.

**Craig Ferguson:** David Beckham and Posh Spice have got a new perfume coming out. It's called "Intimately Beckham." Apparently, it's a delicate combination of anorexic breath and athlete's foot. And that's just hers.



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The percentage of limited, or emergency licenses issued between the 1997-98 and 2003-04 school years by the state Department of Education to teachers taking on special education courses. These are teachers who have little or no specialized training to deal with these most at-risk of students.

### Why it matters

A shortage of special ed teachers has resulted in instructors with little experience and training with such students taking on positions that they aren't always able to handle. As a result, these students — most of whom are either diagnosed with learning disabilities" such as dyslexia, speech impairments and emotional disturbances — aren't getting the help they need to succeed academically. Solving this teacher shortage is crucial to improving the educational and economic destinies of these students and ultimately, this state.