

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Special education enrollment soars

Special education enrollments and costs have been steadily increasing for decades, beginning in 1975, when landmark federal special education legislation revolutionized the education system.

It's becoming unsustainable.

The law, which has been updated several times and is now known as IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), requires school districts to ensure a quality education for all students with disabilities.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

When signing the bill, President Gerald Ford expressed serious reservations about the law that have proved amazingly prescient:

“Everyone can agree with the objective stated in the title of this bill —

educating all handicapped children in our nation.

“The key question is whether the bill will really accomplish that objective.

“Even the strongest supporters of this measure know as well as I that they are falsely raising the expectations of the groups affected by claiming authorization levels which are excessive and unrealistic.”

As the chart at right illustrates, the number of Pottstown students enrolled in special education has skyrocketed in the last 40 years, from 3 percent to nearly 20 percent. (This is similar to other school districts throughout Pennsylvania).

How can this be? Has there been a huge increase in the number of disabled young people?

That's unlikely. What has changed is how aggressive school districts have become in identifying students as needing special help.

There are 13 categories of disability under the law, ranging from mild to severe. Over the years, more and more parents and specialists have been pushing to have ever-greater numbers of students identified as “special needs.” Elaborate regulations have been established and rigorously enforced.

All this is extremely expensive. The cost of special education is nearly three times higher, per pupil, than that of regular education.

Tom Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the views expressed are his alone and not the board's.

NOTE — The figures at right do not include about 75 to 100 Pottstown special education students who are educated annually at private schools at taxpayer expense. The district provides busing.

Pottstown regular education, special education enrollment			
Year	Total enrollment	In-school Special ed students*	%
1980-81	3459	97	3%
1981-82	3323	114	3%
1982-83	3230	124	4%
1983-84	3193	128	4%
1984-85	3182	132	4%
1985-86	3052	115	4%
1986-87	3042	147	5%
1987-88	2876	130	5%
1988-89	2879	176	6%
1989-90	2734	159	6%
1990-91	2804	163	6%
1991-92	2855	215	8%
1992-93	3032	195	6%
1993-94	3111	261	8%
1994-95	3142	280	9%
1995-96	3250	280	9%
1996-97	3319	305	9%
1997-98	3380	325	10%
1998-99	3386	345	10%
1999-00	3371	344	10%
2000-01	3356	391	12%
2001-02	3370	404	12%
2002-03	3312	415	13%
2003-04	3317	413	12%
2004-05	3225	374	12%
2005-06	3196	394	12%
2006-07	3217	415	13%
2007-08	3140	576	18%
2008-09	3120	572	18%
2009-10	3122	457	15%
2010-11	3145	479	16%
2011-12	3145	491	16%
2012-13	3039	486	16%
2013-14	3115	481	15%
2014-15	3164	485	15%
2015-16	3123	492	16%
2016-17	3169	493	16%
2017-18	3183	485	15%
2018-19	3211	564	18%
2019-2020	3345	590	18%
2020-2021	3272	620	19%