

OPINION: What Educational Restructuring Means for Special Education in New Bedford



Written by a concerned educator

We have heard what restructuring (a.k.a. the Turnaround Plan) means for teachers and students at New Bedford High School. What we have not heard about is what educational restructuring means for the special education students in New Bedford Public Schools.

These students, like all other students and educators within the system, will soon feel the pinch of serious financial cutbacks. Recent interoffice memos distributed to student adjustment counselors (SAC's) throughout the system outline some of these drastic changes. These changes are highlighted in an effort to educate the parents about new qualifications for entrance into the NBPS special education program:

1. The IST (instructional support team) process must be accessed. This program does not yet exist in many elementary schools. It is existent only in name and has no formal process of checks and balances.

2. Regular Education staff is lacking training in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act definition of eligibility for special education services and need to be re-educated on exactly who qualifies for individual assistance.

3. A child cannot qualify for special education services if:

- They lack achievement due to cultural, environmental or economic factors
- Are limited English Proficient
- Fail one or more courses or have been retained
- Did poorly on district benchmark testing or state assessments such as MCAS
- Due to behavior contrary to school policy
- Because a child is involved in state court or social services (such as DCF or DYS) or is “socially maladjusted”
- He or she has gaps in his/her education due to chronic absenteeism

Furthermore, if a child is referred by a teacher or parent, then a “clarification meeting” and “clarification documentation form” must be completed. If the referral process is initiated by the child’s pediatrician, then documentation must be forwarded to the administration to clarify with the MD why special education testing is necessary. The same process holds true if the testing is being initiated by an outside social agency such as DCF.

Perhaps the most salient change to the special education process in New Bedford is that mild and moderately delayed students will no longer qualify for services. This is because a student must score two standard deviations below the mean in order to have a significant impairment that requires an individualized education plan.

So, lets review: less children will now qualify for services which will decrease the need for staffing to support those students resulting in significant financial savings for the city of New Bedford. Problem solved! Minimal special needs identified=minimal money spent. That was relatively simple.

In fact, it is so ridiculously simple that it is a wonder that it is just being proposed now! Mildly and moderately delayed students will remain in the mainstream classes with other students and the general education teacher will be responsible for closing the learning gaps and providing the necessary individualized instruction these children require to pass MCAS and stay on par with their peers.

This is Dr. Pia Durkin's grand plan to restructure the special education system in New Bedford. The number of special education students will drastically decline, behavior and emotional problems will disappear, and all students will magically pass standardized state mandated testing.

Sounds like a "win win" situation to the average taxpayer. Sounds like a predictable nightmare for students identified as mild or moderately delayed" , as well their families, classmates and teachers...the future looks quite bleak for these individuals who make up a sizable population of the students attending New Bedford Public Schools.
