

## Special Education – Doing the Right Thing Isn't Easy

### The Right Thing

When we discuss the implications surrounding Special Education in our schools, it is easy for people to assume that we have a 'problem.' In discussing budgets and funding, sometimes we forget that we are talking about children who have significant challenges in life and need our help the most. As we hope you will understand after reading this information, the children are not the problem. Our Federal and NJ State formulas and levels of funding for these children have broken. Investing in the education of children, especially children who need help to become productive members of society is both financially and morally sound. It is also required by law. In short, it's the right thing to do, but it isn't easy.

### The Overall View

The forces governing Special Education services include Federal IDEA, State Administrative code, and case law stemming from mediations and litigations. Each child's education is controlled by an Individual Education Plan (IEP) which is developed by the local district with the child's parents or guardians. This plan documents all the services each child is to receive.

Glen Rock runs a comprehensive Special Education program to comply with the mandate to educate our 346 classified students from age 3

to 21. This includes collaborative services for classified students in general education classes, and subject replacement classes. It also includes transportation and tuition costs for students who are better served in a program outside of Glen Rock. The investment we make in the education of our classified student population pays noticeable dividends. Our students perform significantly better than average in state testing, and the percentage of them who attend college is higher than the state average.

The federal and state governments have not funded this investment in any responsible fashion. Since 2000, our mandated costs have increased by 46%, while our overall aid has decreased. Obviously, this leads to an increasing local property tax burden and budget consumption. This is the heart of the conflict surrounding Special Education.

These increases in Special Education costs are obvious in the budget increase for 2004-05. There are significant increases in transportation, tuition, and related services. The overall year to year increase is a staggering \$737,268, most of which is unfunded by aid which has effectively been frozen since 2000.

The Board has decided to start a Preschool Disabled Class for students with au-

tism, and this investment is part of the 2004-2005 budget. We anticipate that this class will provide a better local program for our students in a more cost effective manner. It will also allow us to receive tuition students from other towns, thereby helping control the overall cost of Special Education in the district.

### Forces governing special education

The requirements to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education for our classified student population from age 3 through 21 are governed by three main forces.

1. **Federal law** – Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was created in the 1970s, reauthorized in 1997 and requires that states develop programs and provide services on the local level for children with disabilities.
2. **NJ State Administrative Code 6A:14** – The NJ State Board of Education and NJ Education Department have developed significant requirements for the implementation of Special Education programs at the local level.
3. **Mediation/Litigation** – Over the years, as parents have advocated for their children, a significant body of case law requirements for school districts

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has grown out of the individual disputes over what are appropriate services for children.

One of the overriding principles of what is required is providing an appropriate education in the 'least restrictive' setting. Glen Rock has embraced inclusion of our classified students into the general education populations, and has developed significant support programs to adhere to this principle whenever possible.

### Glen Rock's Special Education Profile

Glen Rock currently provides services for 346 classified students. The majority of students are educated in the district, but when we cannot meet the needs of a child, he/she is placed in an appropriate program out of district. We pay tuition for and transportation to those programs.

The classifications of our students range across twelve different classification with an overall classification rate of 15.5% of the student population. The NJ classification average over the past few years has been approximately 13.4%, so we are slightly higher than the NJ average.

Once classified, the process for each child is controlled by the development of an Individual Education Program (IEP). The IEP outlines the overall requirements and processes for providing ser-

vices, and is tailored to each child's individual needs.

Within the district, we currently support the following programs:

#### Elementary

- 2 Pre-School Disabled classes, 2 Learning/Language Disabilities classes, and 8.5 Resource Centers

#### Middle School / HS

- 47 Collaborative classes and 28 Resource Center replacement classes

#### Home Programs

- We provide appropriate educational programs for children and parents in the home setting as required by the extent of their disabilities.

#### District-wide

- Our Child Study Team is comprised of 11.5 certified professionals and staff. Their functions support the evaluation of student eligibility and the resulting coordination of programs.
- The Department of Special Services employs 27 Special Education teachers and 24 inclusive teacher assistants who work in our classrooms every day.
- We also employ speech/language therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, vision therapists, hearing

impaired services, orientation and mobility training, and assistive technology and training.

We provide these services within the school year. However, in order to minimize regression, some children require an extended school year program encompassing some of these services during the summer.

### Benefits of Glen Rock's Special Education Program

Glen Rock's Special Education students become productive members of our community and help our entire student population.

- Glen Rock has been on the leading edge of embracing an inclusion model. Our classified students are mainstreamed to the fullest extent possible, providing them with a rich school experience.
- Our classified students participate in district and state testing and perform significantly better than state averages.
- A high percentage of Glen Rock Special Education students go on to college.
- Our General Education students benefit from inclusion diversity

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**Costs of services vs. aid received**

The heart of the conflict surrounding Special Education is the almost complete lack of Federal and NJ State funding to schools for providing these programs. The funding is insufficient and hasn't increased in four years! Our mandated costs have skyrocketed.

Special Education Fact	2000 - 01 Actuals	2004 - 05 Budget	% Change 2000 - 05
<b>Total Expenditures</b>	\$4,385,879	\$6,423,891	46%
<b>Total Federal and State Aid</b>	\$1,514,826	\$1,386,020	-9%
<b>Total Costs funded through Aid</b>	35%	22%	

**2004—2005 Special Education Budget Increase**

The 2004-05 Special Education Budget provides for significant increases in evaluative exams and related services such as Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Speech and Behavioral Therapy. There is a large increase in the cost of providing home programs, and in the cost to transport children to their school programs. There is also a significant increase in the cost of the services provided to hearing impaired children.

Analysis of 2004—2005 Budget Increase

Category	YTY Increase
<b>Child Study Team Evaluative Exams</b>	\$135,000
<b>Speech Consultants</b>	10,000
<b>Behavioral Consultants</b>	41,565
<b>Evaluations</b>	12,000
<b>Other Related Services</b>	17,640
<b>Home Programs</b>	149,020
<b>Hearing Impaired</b>	60,000
<b>Tuition</b>	108,218
<b>Transportation costs</b>	120,000
<b>Staff Contract Salary and Benefit increases</b>	\$83,825
<b>Total \$ Increase YTY</b>	\$737,268
<b>Total % Increase YTY</b>	13.0%

**What can the Board do to improve this situation?**

The Board of Education and indeed the community do not have the flexibility to decide whether to provide these services, but we can offer alternatives that might be more cost effective and more bene-

ficial to our classified students.

One of the fastest growing areas of Special Education classification is Autism. Last year there were 4,600 stu-

dents classified as autistic in NJ, up from 234 when the state first classified such students in 1991. These students face great challenges and require significant support services. In the past, we

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have generally placed these children out of district and paid exorbitant tuition and transportation expenses. The Board has decided to add to the 2004-2005 budget a Pre-school Disabled Class for Students with Autism.

We anticipate that this new class will allow us to educate several of our autistic chil-

dren in town, and also to accept tuition students from other districts. To start the class, we need to invest \$540,560 for a teacher, teacher assistants, therapists and supplies. We anticipate that this cost will be fully covered by a combination of reduced tuition cost for our own students and revenue from tuition from incoming

students.

Investing in starting this class is the first step in a long-term quest to control costs, generate revenue and provide a local community based program for our students who can now be educated close to home among their friends and family.



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