



Vermont principal: Kids raised on gadgets boosting special education

By Bruce Parker
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Taxpayers wanting to know why special education spending never declines in Vermont might as well ask Siri.

One principal points to the Apple iPhone guide with the soothing female voice and her technological counterparts as part of the problem.

“We talk about distracted driving. There’s also distracted parenting. People aren’t aware of the fact that, no, your child won’t learn to speak paying attention to computers, iPads and television. They are forgetting that they are essential to their child’s education,” said Shelley Mathias, principal at Edmunds Elementary School in Burlington.

Mathias, who is tasked with budgeting for special needs students each year, says speech and language pathology services are soaring in part because games and gadgets are robbing children of the ability to speak.

“At another school where I was principal, over 20 percent of my kids were getting speech and language services. These were not kids with birth defects. These were not kids that had a disability as a result of a neurological or physical problem. These were kids who were merely underexposed to language. They don’t know sentence structure. They don’t know syntax. They don’t know when they’re being asked a question. They can’t have a conversation. A 5-year-old should be able to carry on a pretty lively conversation.”

In this year’s budget for K-12 special education, spending on speech and language dwarfs other categories of services. Of \$305 million designated for special education, Vermont appropriated \$23.1 million for speech and audiology services. By comparison, the state will spend \$11 million on psychological services, \$9.5 million for transportation services, \$5.2 million for occupational therapy services, \$3.3 million for “other support services” and \$0.9 million for health services.

According to education experts, ever-expanding categories of special needs, combined with new assessment tools, contributes to the growth of special education enrollment. As health professionals create new labels for behavior in young kids, more become eligible for special education.

“Nationally, you see a huge increase in nonspecific disabilities. In particular, that’s ADD and ADHD, and other things you can’t necessarily pinpoint a specific problem — just that they are somehow having difficulty with something,” said Neal McCluskey, associate director at Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.

“I think the main motivation is at the parent level to say, ‘Look, I’m going to get my child diagnosed with a disability, and then he or she gets extra support, or gets accommodations on tests, and things like that.’”

Like Mathias, Cato’s education czar said many young kids are being deprived of adult interaction necessary to learn language.

“It’s certainly possible that kids spending too much time on the Internet and in front of television is hurting their language skills. . . . It could also be that more and more kids are put in day care and preschool programs where they may not be getting a lot of interaction with adults. They just hear toddlers talking.”

However, McCluskey said another reason for special education growth pertains to testing requirements for No Child Left Behind. Specifically, schools in some states can report higher test scores when kids are exempted through special education.

“There could be an incentive for a school or district to classify kids as learning disabled if they think they will be able to not count them on standardized test scores for which they are held responsible. There are in every state supposed to be rules for how you do No Child Left Behind testing . . . but you’d have to look at what the state’s rules are for which kids are included and which aren’t, based on disability.

Ernie Wheeler, special education consultant at the Vermont Agency of Education, said special education grows for a variety of reasons. While he agreed new labels for autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit disorder make more kids eligible for special ed, he added that kids with special needs also stay in the program longer.

“They’ll do a 14th year or a 15th year in order to get all their credits for graduation or to be ready to go to the adult services world. Some kids with more severe disabilities will stay until age 22, which is the upper end of their eligibility,” Wheeler said.

“It’s a combination of answers. It’s kids staying in school longer, kids being identified earlier and better tools out there to identify kids.”

Whether special education spending is owed to broader identification of needs or the time students remain in the program, Mathias said education reform will have to grapple with kids gravely unprepared for school.

“If we look at the combined growth in things like speech and language pathologists, and if we looked at the increase in occupational therapists and physical therapists, those things alone have grown substantially. Children are arriving with no core muscle strength, they don’t have fine

motor skills. These are things a majority of kids used to have, but now we have kids coming in without these things. (We have) 5-year-olds who can't hold a pencil or a crayon effectively. It's just amazing," Mathias said.

"Technology is exploding, and there's a big unintended consequence there. And it's costing us money."