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Special Education Debate Shifts From Money to New Ideas

By KATE ZERNIKE

GREENWICH, Conn., May 11 — Three years ago, this affluent suburb had one of the nation's highest percentages of children in special education, with one in every five high school students labeled disabled.

Growing special education costs were swallowing the regular education budget. Teachers, overwhelmed because of understaffing, referred more children to special education — including a large number the schools now say were not disabled — because there they would get the extra help parents were demanding.

Finally, town leaders cried “enough.”

This year, the special education popula-

tion here has declined to 13 percent from 17 percent overall in 1997. The schools are living within their budgets for the first time that anyone can remember. And reflecting defused tensions between parents and the schools, the number of special education lawsuits is down to roughly 10 this year.

What happened in Greenwich reflects how much the debate over special education has changed. Since the first federal special education law was enacted in 1975, educators and politicians felt they could not talk about the program unless it was to propose more money. Even five years ago, to question the program or whether too many students were wrongly classified was to stand accused of being callous, of trying to revert to

The nation learns from changes in the Greenwich schools.

the 1960's, when some state laws deemed disabled children uneducable.

But more and more, states, school districts and policy makers are saying that what is needed is not just more money, but wholesale reform of special education.

This week in Washington, Republican and Democratic policy groups made a rare joint

call for change, saying special education itself is “disabled,” and calling in a report for many of the reforms that Greenwich embraced to reduce its special education numbers.

These include emphasizing early reading skills, keeping children who are not disabled from being referred to the program in the first place and focusing on whether children are learning rather than whether schools are filling out the required paperwork. The hope is these changes will have an influence as Congress prepares to reauthorize the special education law next year.

The talk of reform comes just as Con-

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Financing to Fundamental Change

gress appears poised for the first time to pay the full share of special education costs that the federal government promised — but never provided — when the law enacted in 1975. Senator James M. Jeffords, Republican of Vermont, held the Bush tax cut hostage to a pledge for more special education money last month.

Those proposing change say that money is important, but that it is not enough, and may actually aggravate the problems by masking them for a few more years. They say the system must be reformed.

"Simply doubling or tripling or quadrupling the money is not going to address the core problems," said Andrew J. Rotherham, director of

the schools project for the Progressive Policy Institute, which, along with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, a conservative think tank, released the report recommending reform. "Clearly there is a lot to celebrate about this law over the last 30 years, but on the other hand, there are also some really pressing problems, and we owe it to all kids to address them."

For Roger J. Lulow, who arrived as superintendent in Greenwich in early 1998, reform was simply a practical necessity. "The demand for more federal funding has been the mantra on everything for years," he said. "But it was clear to me coming in that we had to get this solved in a more fundamental way."

The number of students in special education nationwide has grown 65

percent since the law was passed, to about 6.1 million in the 1999-2000 school year, 8.2 percent of the overall student body. The report released this week, borrowing Pentagon argot, argues that the program has suffered "mission creep," expanding to include children it was never intended to educate.

The highest numbers have developed around two poles. One is in cities, where schools classify children, disproportionately black and Hispanic, whom they often do not know how to handle. The second is in the most competitive suburbs, where the pressure for students to do well makes parents and teachers look for the place to get the best education possible. The biggest growth has been in the number of children classified as "learning disabled" — which was 21 percent when the law was passed, and 46 percent in 1998.

"For a long time there was the message that special ed was the only game in town; if your child needed some sort of help, go there," said Christine M. Chambers, director of special services for the Wilton, Conn., public schools.

Many states also gave school districts additional money for special education students, creating an incentive to refer children. As medicine has improved, the number of children now able to go to school has increased, but so has the number of services they require.

On average, it costs twice as much to educate a disabled student as it

Addressing the rising number of children listed as 'learning disabled.'

does to educate a regular student.

With special education seen as a third-rail issue, states have been reforming general education before addressing any problems in special education. But they have found that special education has impeded overall reform. Forty percent of all new money spent on education in the time since the law was passed has gone to special education, according to the Fordham-Progressive Policy Institute studies. In Massachusetts, according to one study in the same report, 88 of about 300 districts statewide spent all the money they received under a sweeping, \$7 billion education reform act passed in 1993 on special education.

Some states have removed the incentive to refer children to special education, paying districts a lump sum based on the number of special education students they would be expected to have, rather than on a per-student basis.

But there are also more wholesale approaches. Massachusetts, which used to have the highest rate of special education students in the nation,

last year tightened eligibility requirements and changed a state law that required schools to provide whatever services would allow the "maximum possible benefit" — a task many schools said was unworkable. Vermont also passed a law requiring more early intervention to prevent children who were not truly disabled from being referred to special education — the strategy New York City schools adopted under former Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew.

"No one is pretending they are going to prevent spina bifida or deafness," said Chester E. Finn Jr., who coordinated the report for the Fordham Foundation. "But a lot of these kids might be kept from being sent to special education if they are taught properly in the first place."

Greenwich was forced to this conclusion in 1997.

With the costs of lawsuits and services rising, this, the richest school district in Connecticut, cried poor, freezing all the money left in its \$100 million budget and borrowing \$750,000 from the town.

"You had parents saying to special education parents, 'You're the reason we don't have soccer equipment,'" said Candace Timpson, head of the special education committee in the town's PTA. "And you couldn't blame them."

The school board examined the curriculum to see where and why students were falling behind — and therefore more likely to move to special education — and changed it

to make it narrower, but clearer on what students were expected to learn and when.

This meant teachers had to spend less time reviewing material in class. Rather than having special education students go to a resource room, the schools created a sort of traveling special education team that now moves among regular classrooms, advising teachers on how to deal with students without referring them to special education.

The district also invested \$4 million in a new early-reading program, based less on whole language, sent teachers for professional development and hired a teaching coach for each building. The goal has been to see the schools as one system, not two separate ones for special and regular education.

In the last few years, the schools have actually returned money to the town, said Genevieve J. Krob, chairwoman of the school board, defusing tension over special education. And parents say they do not sense the animosity they once did. "I think people have realized that this is a group of people who can tell you what's not going right in your education system," Ms. Timpson said. "It's a matter of better productivity: every moment spent on fighting or trying to deal with special education is another moment not focused on the question of educating all kids."

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