

## Chapter 6

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# Special Education at Coles Elementary School

**Robert Cullen**

Marge Scheflen's classroom at Coles Elementary School in Manassas, Virginia, is an unusual one, reflecting the unusual nature of the teaching she does. It's smaller than the normal classrooms at Coles, and it does not have the standard collection of small desks for the pupils and one large desk for the teacher. Instead, it has two tables, one rectangular and one circular, and an odd collection of bookshelves that divide the remaining space into smaller nooks and carrels. Still less standard is the range of instructional material posted on the walls. There are placards on one wall depicting letters of the alphabet and words they initiate—"A is for Apple." Close by is a chart describing how a plot turns in a work of fiction, a chart only slightly less sophisticated in its approach than material you might expect to see in a creative writing class for high school students. The setting makes two things

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quickly apparent. This is a classroom designed to teach children individually and in small groups. And it is designed to teach children with an irregular range of aptitudes, children who may well be capable of analyzing the plot in the movie they watched over the weekend but at the same time be incapable of writing the word "plot" correctly.

Ms. Scheflen teaches special education, and that is the nature of special education at Coles Elementary, as at other schools. Her classroom is designed for children deemed to have normal intelligence and abnormal needs. But that formulation, although true, oversimplifies the complexity of the problems faced by special education students, their parents—and the teachers and school systems that serve them. This chapter chronicles what I observed during a few days visiting Coles Elementary and suggests how formidable those problems are.

### Inside a Special Education Classroom

Ms. Scheflen's pupils are part of the fastest-growing segment in the special education population—children diagnosed with learning disabilities. They range from second graders to fifth graders. They come to her and her aide, Colleen Isbell, in groups of four, five, and six throughout the day. Some come for only an hour. Some spend most of their day in special education with Ms. Scheflen or another teacher. Ms. Scheflen responds to them all with a calm and patient warmth, rarely criticizing them for failures, rarely getting effusive when they succeed.

She tries, of course, to give them chances to succeed. On one fairly standard day in 2000, she organized a little learning game for six fourth graders. Two were girls and four were boys, a fairly typical division between the genders in special education. The children stood in line and tried to spell a word from their weekly spelling list. Then they tossed a soft white bath sponge into a waste can six feet away. They could get one point for spelling their word correctly and one point for making a basket.

"Best, Roger',"<sup>1</sup> Ms. Scheflen challenged a ten-year-old boy with a mop of dirty-blond hair hanging over his forehead. "Spell, 'best.'"

"B-e-a-d," Roger replied.

Gently, Ms. Scheflen corrected him. He tossed the sponge in the basket and got his consolation point. He marked it on the blackboard next to his name. Part of the game is adding up and keeping track of the scores.

A chubby boy named Peter took his place at the head of the line.

"Together," Ms. Scheflen said.

Peter cast an eye at the blackboard, where among the names was that of a classmate, Heather.

"T-o-g-e-a-t-h-e-r," Peter spelled.

This time, Ms. Scheflen tried to help him with a mnemonic, a memory aid. "If you want to be together with a girl, you have to get her first," she said. "To-get-her. Together."

Peter nodded and shot his basket.

A bell rang, and four of the children left for a physical education class. That left only two, a boy named Benjamin and a girl named Dorothy. (This suggests why special education is costly. The ratio of students to staff in Ms. Scheflen's room, never more than 3:1 or 4:1, was at this time 1:1.) Mrs. Isbell began to work with Benjamin on a paragraph he was trying to write. Ms. Scheflen sat down with Dorothy for some one-on-one reading.

Dorothy, a painfully shy, quiet girl with a variety of problems relating to language, began to read aloud from a passage in a book about ghost towns. She came to the word "thousands" and stopped, unable to decipher it.

Ms. Scheflen wrote the word on a piece of paper. She underlined the last five letters, "sands."

"Do you know that?" she asked Dorothy.

Dorothy did.

She circled the letters "r" and "h" at the beginning of the word. Dorothy quietly made the

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appropriate sound.

Ms. Scheflen circled the letters “o” and “u.” She reminded Dorothy of the sound they made. Slowly, Dorothy pieced together the word: “Thousands.”

Ms. Scheflen nodded her approval, and they went on.

This scene, repeated countless times, is the essence of special education at Coles Elementary. Though English is normally their first language, Ms. Scheflen’s kids respond to written English words as if they were in a foreign language they were just beginning to study. Little comes easily. When they read a difficult word, it is as if they are peeling it off the page, letter by letter. The rhythm of the written language is beyond them.

Sometimes, Ms. Scheflen tries an alternative way of getting a child to master spelling or reading a word, like the mnemonic she used with Peter. But more often, she does what she did with

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Dorothy. She drills her pupils in the standard reading techniques that their more fortunate peers picked up by the end of first grade—associating sounds and letters, deciphering diphthongs, assembling phonemes.

### **Reading Instruction for the Learning Disabled**

Coles Elementary teaches reading by a method called “guided reading strategies.” The school’s principal, Candace Rotruck, describes it as a blend of phonics and the whole-language method that doesn’t stress one or the other. Dorothy had heard all the phonics information Ms. Scheflen was giving her in first and second grade, but it didn’t register. She had strong visual and artistic aptitudes, but a blind spot for reading. And being shy, she did not ask for help. She sat quietly and politely. She repeated the first grade, but it didn’t seem to help her. When she was lagging two years behind her peers, she was referred

for a special education evaluation and diagnosed with a variety of learning disabilities. Ms. Scheflen’s job is to help her try to catch up.

Another bell rang, and a new group of pupils entered Ms. Scheflen’s room. One was a fidgety, bespectacled, tow-headed second-grade boy named Eddie in a red T-shirt with a logo for Wilson, the sporting-goods company. He had been reading a barnyard story.

“Where does this story take place?” Ms. Scheflen asked when it was Eddie’s turn for tutoring.

“Outside,” Eddie replied. He drummed a pencil against the underside of the table.

“What’s the name of a place that’s outside, that has fields and animals and a barn?” Ms. Scheflen asked him.

“I don’t know,” Eddie said. He didn’t seem obstreperous. He appeared unable to get his mind

around Ms. Scheflen's question.

"A farm," she told him. He nodded, vaguely.

Ms. Scheflen tried to get Eddie to tell her what happened at the beginning and end of the story he'd been reading. He was supposed to have drawn a picture of the story's beginning and another of its end, a device Ms. Scheflen uses to improve comprehension. But Eddie couldn't respond. He continued to drum his pencil against the underside of the table. He squirmed.

"Eddie, did you take your medication this morning?" Ms. Scheflen asked. About 18 pupils at Coles Elementary take Ritalin or another drug intended to improve their concentration and ability to focus. Eight of the 18 are in special education. Eddie is among them; he is supposed to get his dose at preschool day care.

"I don't know," Eddie said.

Ms. Scheflen persisted for a moment, trying to ascertain whether Eddie's inability to concentrate was more a chemical problem than an attitudinal one. Eddie insisted he could not remember whether he got his medication or not.

"Well, do the best you can," Ms. Scheflen finally said.

Another bell, another group of children—this time fifth graders. Ms. Scheflen had one of them draw a slip of paper from a hat full of slips. Each slip had a writing topic on it. The selected topic for the day turned out to be "A musical instrument I would like to play." Ms. Scheflen set out to help her pupils write a paragraph on that topic, beginning with a freckle-faced, snub-nosed boy named Andrew, who was a few days shy of his eleventh birthday.

Andrew sat down next to Ms. Scheflen and without hesitation told her he would like to play the drums.

"You play the cello now, don't you?" Ms. Scheflen asked.

"I don't like it," Andrew said.

"Why would you like to play drums?"

Drums, Andrew said, would be more fun. He wouldn't have to lug them around as he has to lug the cello. Maybe he could form a band with a friend of his and make some money. He could make a lot of noise and let out some of the anger he feels. And, he said with evident relish, "it would drive my sister insane."

Ms. Scheflen nodded and asked Andrew to write a "web," a writing tool in which ideas are gathered like spokes around a wheel. It helps pupils organize their thoughts before writing an actual paragraph.

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“Fed. [sic.] 4, 2000,” Andrew wrote on his paper. Then he started to write down his reasons for playing drums. He wrote nothing about the anger of which he spoke. That may have been too frightening to commit to paper. But he did remember his sister. He wrote that playing the drums would “bive my sister in shain.”

## The County’s Perspective

To paraphrase Tolstoy, every special education student is special in his own way. There is no perfectly typical case, and there is no perfectly typical school. But Andrew and Coles Elementary, judging by the national data, fall within the normal range of special education pupils and programs.

Coles Elementary is about 30 years old, built of red brick, with a parking lot to one side and an athletic field in the back. Inside the front door, the usual array of plaques and awards is mounted on the wall. The school has a program for the hearing-impaired which serves several neighborhoods, but other than that, its special education offerings are no different from those at other schools in the area.

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Prince William County, where Coles Elementary is located, is an area in transition from rural South to standard American suburb. Stonewall Jackson’s statue stands guard at the Bull Run Battlefield about ten miles from the school, and the two-lane blacktop roads in the neighborhood still wind past four-room, clapboard farmhouses in the midst of modest pastures and fields. But the roads nowadays also wind past new cul-de-sacs and subdivisions of larger, more expensive homes with chimneys and two-car garages and sun decks. Prince William is becoming a bedroom community for the burgeoning high-tech industries of Fairfax County to the north. In 1997, the Census Bureau reported a population of 254,464—up from

215,000 in 1990.<sup>2</sup> Of that, 82.5 percent were white and 12.8 percent black. About six percent identified themselves as Hispanic. The median household income was most recently estimated at \$55,276, and the number of families living in poverty was estimated at 5.4 percent.

The Prince William County Schools are administered from an old Nike missile base in a wooded area eight miles west of Interstate 95; the base was once part of the air defense system for the nation’s capital. The military left a series of small, temporary buildings, and Prince William County school administrators shuttle between them for meetings like students shuttling between temporary classrooms. The director of special education for the county is Tom Carter, a burly North Carolinian who came to Prince William 32 years ago and has occupied his present post since 1990.<sup>3</sup>

From Carter’s perspective, special education is a constant battle between the demand for service and budgetary constraints. Since he began his career, he has seen special education grow from a program that served a limited population—primarily the deaf, the blind, the mute, and the

severely retarded—into one that wants every year to consume more of the county’s educational resources. That’s in large part because of the identification of new disability categories.

“In 1973, we had about six percent of our students in special education and there was no such thing as a learning disability,” Carter said in an interview. “We didn’t recognize Attention Deficit Disorder [ADD] until 1990. Now about 12.7 percent of our students are in special education. At least half of those are diagnosed with learning disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorder. We have 12 to 13 percent of our students using 25 percent of our budget.”

Carter does not think there are more children with disabilities now than there were when he was a young teacher. He thinks that the system has changed so as to identify more students as disabled. One reason, he thinks, is that parents today see no stigma in the label. They may even want a child to be identified as disabled.

“It’s an acceptable handicap,” he said. “It’s a perfect excuse for why a child isn’t performing.”

Carter feels that some percentage of the county’s special education population—he doesn’t know precisely what percentage—is getting extra help for questionable reasons. Essentially, they are children whose parents had the knowledge and wherewithal to determine that special education might be a good deal for their children and then pushed to make certain they got it.

They can do that, Carter said, because the criteria for defining special education eligibility are subject to interpretation and vulnerable to manipulation. “A lot of cases are not perfectly clear as to whether the child should be eligible,” Carter said. “You could test the child five times, and three of the testing panels would say yes, and two would say no.”

The county would prefer to use an objective yardstick. It has devised an evaluation rule that attempts to make objective the somewhat vague federal and state laws on eligibility. To be entitled to special education in Prince William County, a child should have an IQ twenty-three points higher than his performance on a similarly scaled test of academic achievement. This is not the only criterion the county uses, but it is, perhaps, the most important.

A parent who disagrees with the verdict of the tests can hire psychologists and lawyers to dispute it. Occasionally (though no statistics are kept on the subject), the school system is forced to give in. This, Carter feels, tends to bias the system in favor of children from middle- and upper-middle-class homes. Their parents are more likely to have the resources to fight the school system than are blue-collar and poor parents. In addition, the law states that a child’s environmental disadvantages cannot be used as a qualification for special education. This, again, tends to favor a child from a comfortable home. If he or she is not achieving, there can’t be environmental factors behind it. But a child from a trailer park or public housing?

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## How Special Education Is Funded in Prince William County

Carter would not mind so much, except that the pie for education in Prince William County is finite, and every dollar spent on special education is a dollar that won't be spent on children deemed by the law to have no special needs. Virginia's education funding system aggravates the problem. The state provides a basic aid sum per pupil to Prince William County schools, which amounted to \$2,120 in the most recent fiscal year. On top of that, it makes a blanket grant of \$146 per pupil to Prince William to cover special education. This grant is paid regardless of how many of the district's children are enrolled in special education classes. Thus, in Virginia, a district in which few pupils are diagnosed with special education needs will find that the state funds a higher proportion of its special education budget than the state does in a district where a higher percentage of children are diagnosed with disabilities. Put another way, if Prince William had one-tenth of all its pupils in special education classes, its state aid for special education would come to \$1,460 per pupil in the program. If the special education population rises to roughly one child in seven, the state aid drops to \$1,000 per pupil in the program.

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The federal government provides Prince William County with about \$3.5 million annually to cover the cost of extraordinary cases, such as a child whose disabilities require the services of a full-time, one-on-one aide. But that, Carter points out, is a paltry percentage of the roughly \$90 million that Prince William spends annually on special education, especially in view of the fact that so much of the spending is mandated by federal law.<sup>4</sup> Special education in Prince William County is a classic case of unfunded mandates—in this case from both the federal and state governments—falling on the shoulders of local taxpayers.

The county calculates that special education costs, on average, a little more than twice the education of an average student, which is about \$6,500. The bottom line is that every time a child is diagnosed with learning disabilities in the Prince William County school system, the diagnosis costs the county thousands of dollars in annual expenditures.

As a result, Carter and the school administration press principals like Ms. Rotruck to stick to the guidelines in determining whether a pupil is eligible for special education. The administration doesn't want pupils made eligible until and unless they show that 23-point gap between intelligence and achievement. The administration is trying to slow the increase in the special education population and make certain that only those who meet the eligibility criteria are certified. This policy may make some fiscal sense, at least in the short term, but it also has an educational impact. Principals and teachers may notice that a child has special learning problems in kindergarten or first grade. They can and do try to provide such a child with remedial help. But it may take a couple of years for that child's learning disability to cause the requisite 23-point gap. Until it does, the child is not eligible for special education services, and he or she may not get the full-scale early intervention that could minimize the impact of a learning disability.

On top of that, Carter noted, there is the paperwork generated by special education. Each child's case quickly accumulates a thick file of forms generated at teacher discussions, evaluation sessions, and meetings with parents to work out the required Individual Education Plan for each pupil. Simply assessing a pupil to determine his eligibility for special education can cost \$5,000-\$7,000.

As a result, Carter said, the county Board of Education and the school administration have begun to feel that "special education is out of kilter." The Board, in its legislative policy statement for 2000, asked Prince William County's representatives in Richmond to oppose any measure that would make Virginia's special education requirements exceed those already mandated by federal law, particularly in ways that give parents additional rights. Carter thinks this is part of a predictable reaction against the growing cost of special education. "There will be a backlash," he said. "I just don't know when it's coming."

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## **The View from the School**

If you leave the Prince William County Board of Education compound and drive the five miles to Coles Elementary School, the perspective changes and so does the perception of special education. For one thing, the budget dynamic is much different from the point of view of a school, its principal and teachers, and its parents. For another, the needs of individual children, an abstraction in the system's offices, become concrete concerns in the school setting. Some 70 of the 530 children at Coles are in one special education program or another. They stop being numbers on a spreadsheet. They all have faces and names.

Candace Rotruck, the principal at Coles, is a kindly woman in her late forties. Ms. Rotruck grew up in West Virginia in the era before federal laws mandating special education programs. She can remember peers who had trouble reading. But in those days, that was considered dullness rather than a disability, and there were still many places in society for people who couldn't read well. One high school classmate who was barely literate, she recalled, became a policeman.<sup>5</sup>

By the time Ms. Rotruck finished her training at West Virginia University, special education was being woven into the fabric of American schools, thanks to federal legislative mandates. Ms. Rotruck had had a summer job as a lifeguard teaching mentally retarded children to swim. She had loved the work. Upon graduation, she got a full-time job teaching the mentally retarded. Over the years, she also taught children with severe speech problems and learned some American Sign Language. Then she moved into administration, becoming a principal in 1995.

One thing her experience gave her is an appreciation for the paperwork burden imposed on special education teachers. (Ms. Rotruck has two large milk crates on the floor of her office containing forms that must be filled out as part of the evaluation process for each child who is a special education candidate. She has file cabinets full of folders, each one several inches thick, on the school's special education students.) She tries to ease the paperwork burden on her staff by doing a lot of it herself, often on weekends. And she has one special education teacher who does not meet with students until 10:30 each morning, giving her two hours to work on the

communal red tape. Partly as a result, Ms. Rotruck said, Coles Elementary does not have the problems with burnout and teacher turnover in the special education program that plague other schools in Prince William County.

Eighteen of Coles Elementary's 50 staff members are involved in special education. Some are teachers of children with learning disabilities, like Ms. Scheflen. Some are aides, like Mrs. Isbell. Some are interpreters and specialists assigned to the program for hearing-impaired students at the school, which serves deaf children from several surrounding neighborhoods. There is a speech therapist and a part-time psychologist. By contrast, children at Coles Elementary who are simply slow learners, but do not meet the special education criteria, have a relatively small number of staff devoted to their needs; one reading specialist works with anyone in the early grades who is having trouble reading.

Yet Ms. Rotruck does not see Coles Elementary's special education population as a financial burden. To the contrary, she said, "Special education keeps a small school like ours afloat."

That is because of the county's budget formula. It allocates to Ms. Rotruck's budget \$2,650 for each normal child; special education student may get an allocation of as much as \$8,000. Using all the funds allocated to her, Ms. Rotruck is responsible for hiring staff. She must do this within fairly tight guidelines, assigning teachers and aides where the law requires them. But, she said, "It's like a family. All the money goes in one big pot." The money for special education gives her some flexibility in other areas of the school.

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So, although the growth of special education seems like a potential fiscal disaster from the county's perspective, it does not seem that way to a principal or to teachers. They have no financial incentive to limit the number of special education students.

But it would be a mistake to suggest that the identification of special education students at Coles Elementary is driven by budgetary considerations. It is driven, rather, by pupils' problems and the desire of teachers and parents to do something about them. This was the case with Andrew, Ms. Scheflen's 11-year-old fifth-grade student.

## **The Learning-Disabled Student**

Andrew is the second of three children; he has a sister who is twelve and a brother who is six. His mother, who did not complete college, runs a store that sells honey-glazed hams. His father, who has a degree in wildlife management, owns a lawn-care service.<sup>6</sup> His father, in an interview, suggested that he, too, might have some undiagnosed learning disabilities. He called himself "scatterbrained" and said he had had trouble focusing on tasks as a boy. He also had trouble reading and required six years to finish college.

Andrew's father was not a special education student, though in his boyhood fewer children were. He may, in fact, have received an informal version of special education. He remembered that, when he was roughly Andrew's age, his parents sent him to spend the summer with a

grandmother in Vermont. This woman decided that her grandson needed tutoring. She handed him a copy of *The Bounty* trilogy and insisted that he read some of it with her every morning. By the end of that summer, Andrew's father had finished the trilogy, and his reading was much improved.

Both his parents recalled that Andrew was slow to read. But his older sister was slow as well, and her problems seemed to diminish around the third grade. They assumed Andrew's would as well. Their efforts to read to him and get him to read back to them did not have happy results. Andrew could not perform. His parents, particularly his father, chastised him for not trying hard enough, for not paying attention. Reading sessions at home often ended with books being hurled across the room in frustration. This may account for some of the anger of which Andrew spoke in his conversation with Ms. Schefflen. "We were hard on him," Andrew's mother recalled in an interview. "We had no idea what a reading disability was."

Andrew's performance in first grade was unsatisfactory, but his parents and teachers decided to wait to see if he would grow out of his problems. They thought that perhaps he was reacting badly to the birth of his younger brother, Tyler, and would eventually adjust. Second grade, though, saw no improvement. Andrew's problems spread to behavioral issues. He talked back to his teacher. He showed anger and frustration. His second-grade teacher, toward the end of the year, suggested that he be evaluated for learning disabilities. His parents agreed.

Andrew's parents never hired their own lawyers or psychologists. They relied on the school system's evaluation. The process took about six weeks. A Coles Elementary evaluation for special education eligibility begins with a meeting among Ms. Rotruck, the child's teacher, and the school's psychologist. They fill out an evaluation form and advise the child's parents that the process is underway. "It should not be a surprise to them," Ms. Rotruck notes. "By the time it reaches this stage, a child has usually been having significant difficulties, and the parents are already concerned."

During the process, a diagnostician comes to the school to test the child's achievement level in reading, math, or written language. The psychologist tests the child's IQ. A visiting teacher meets with the parents at the child's home or in school, trying to gauge the child's environment and behavior outside of school. Ms. Rotruck sits in on the child's class for a few hours, observing. The speech specialist screens for hearing problems. The child takes a simple vision test. When all of this is done, the diagnostician, psychologist, principal, and child's teacher meet. They vote on whether the child is eligible for special education. The child's parents are entitled to attend and vote at this meeting. Usually, Ms. Rotruck says, the vote is unanimous one way or another. The difficult cases, she feels, are the ones where she believes a child does have a learning disability and does need special education, but the child's scores don't show the required 23-point gap. She can try to have a child declared eligible in such cases, but if she

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does, she knows she will likely get a stern letter from the county school administration asking her to justify the decision.

When Andrew's testing process was over, his parents went to the meeting. They were told that Andrew had a disability having to do with reading and writing. Ms. Rotruck told them he might also suffer from ADD. This combination is not infrequent, and ADD can exacerbate the reading disorder. Andrew, for instance, has a tendency to transpose b and d. If he could focus his attention better, more intensely, he might be able to fight that tendency more effectively. But he has difficulty focusing.

As far as his parents know, that is as specific as Andrew's diagnosis got. "You go to a meeting, and they ask if you have any questions," Andrew's mother recalled. "But you have a million questions, and it's hard to come up with one."

Andrew's father compared the experience to going to a mechanic and being told that your car has a complicated and costly problem. You may not completely understand the diagnosis, or agree with it. But unless you know more about the car than the mechanic does, you have little choice but to trust his judgment and tell him to go ahead and make the repairs he suggests.

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The only outside specialist Andrew's parents have consulted is the family pediatrician, who said Andrew might have ADD or might have a mere developmental delay that will cure itself. He did not urge Andrew's parents to put him on medication, and they did not do so.

For Andrew's parents, the diagnosis was an occasion for mixed emotions.

"I was glad to know it was something," his mother said. "It was a relief to know that there was a problem, that we could get help."

There was also a burden of guilt. "I felt very guilty because of the way I'd treated him [prior to the diagnosis]," Andrew's mother said. "Telling him he could do it if he paid attention. Accusing him of not trying hard enough." Andrew's parents had given him a fair amount of intellectual stimulation outside of school. He took cello lessons. He was in the Cub Scouts. He played youth soccer and baseball. He and his father took occasional fishing trips. Still, there was a nagging fear that they had not done enough.

To Andrew's mother, the diagnosis was a positive step in that it changed her son's status from a child who wouldn't try to read to that of a child who had a disability that prevented him from learning to read in the normal way.

At first, Andrew's mother felt little or no stigma attached to the label of special education. Andrew went willingly to the special education classes. He showed some improvement in school.

After a couple of years, however, she started to notice other things. There was Back-to-School Night at the beginning of Andrew's fifth-grade year. All the pupils had work posted on the

bulletin board, including Andrew. His was a picture of a chicken, except that the word “chicken” underneath it was so badly misspelled that it was hard to figure out what he had intended to write. His mother remembered feeling embarrassed for her son.

She said she had noticed that Andrew has fewer friends than her older child, who is not in special education. She was uncertain whether this was caused by a social stigma attached to special education or simply by Andrew’s personality. If other boys were in the house playing video games, she said, Andrew might quickly get bored, leave them, and go off to do something by himself. “And he still, to this day, sucks his thumb,” she sighed.

Ironically, considering he was the parent who had reading problems as a child, Andrew’s father resisted the disability diagnosis. “I thought maybe he hadn’t gotten enough attention from us, compared to his older sister and younger brother. I thought maybe his classes were too big—maybe 29 or 30 kids in first grade. I thought maybe the county was trying to do whole-word recognition instead of phonics. I didn’t think it was a disability,” he said. He smiled, self-deprecatingly. “Maybe it’s an ego thing—you don’t want your boy to be called disabled.”

***“I really don’t understand learning disabilities,” Andrew’s father said. “But I’ve come to grips with the fact that he has a problem.”***

“I really don’t understand learning disabilities,” he went on. “I mean, how can he sit down and do a 200-piece jigsaw puzzle, or put together an elaborate Lego toy, and not be able to read? But I’ve come to grips with the fact that he has a problem.”

The major concern Andrew’s parents expressed about the program at Coles Elementary is the time he spends in Ms. Scheflen’s classroom. While other fifth-graders take social studies or science, Andrew works with Ms. Scheflen on reading and writing. His parents are concerned that, when he gets to middle school, Andrew will be too far behind in those subjects to catch up. Andrew has an aunt who’s an archaeologist, and he’s expressed interest in that profession; he also likes watching documentaries about animals on television. As a result, science is one professional career track Andrew’s parents think he might have a chance to pursue. Science is important to them.

But Ms. Scheflen and Ms. Rotruck have persuaded them that unless Andrew catches up in reading, he won’t be able to grasp science or history. On the other hand, if he does catch up in reading, he ought to be able to make up fairly quickly the science he is missing now.

## **Parents’ Perception of a Special Education Child’s School and District**

Andrew’s mother said she was aware of the fact that some school districts would assign Andrew to a regular science class with a co-teacher to help him and other special education students keep up. But she has not asked Ms. Rotruck to do that for Andrew. For one thing, it would mean rocking the boat. For another, she has a sense that it “wouldn’t be fair” to ask for so much special assistance for one child.

But perhaps the main factor in the disinclination of Andrew's parents not to insist on a mainstream science class for their son is the relationship they have developed with Ms. Rotruck and Ms. Scheflen. They believe both women have Andrew's best interests in mind. They trust both women. In fact, Ms. Scheflen, who has a daughter in the same class as Andrew's older sister, has become a family friend.

This reflects a common pattern at Coles Elementary that does not seem to make its way into many media reports on special education. Those reports tend to focus on disputes between parents who insist on mainstream classroom experiences for their children and school districts that refuse to provide it on grounds that the child is too severely handicapped. Sometimes, the people in these stories become caricatures—the ego-driven, overeducated parents who are prepared to game the system for all it is worth to get what they want, or the callous bureaucrats in the skinflint school system.

At Coles Elementary, there are few, if any, bitter disputes and no caricatures. No one is callous. Rather than see the teachers and principal as adversaries, the parents of special education students by and large see them as expert advisers and rely on their judgment. And parents tend to listen to their children, to be guided by what the children have to say.

***At the national level, advocates for the disabled tend to push hard for an integrated classroom experience for nearly all special education students.***

One of the parents on Coles Elementary's Curriculum Advisory Council, a sort of informal board of trustees for the school, is JoAnne L. She has a daughter who is considered to be "E.M.R.," or educable mentally retarded. In an interview, Mrs. L. said she had brought her daughter to the school uncertain whether she should be placed in a mainstream classroom or a separate program for the retarded. The school at first placed the child in a regular class, but the girl didn't like going to school. She told her

mother she felt stupid. Ms. Rotruck had the child evaluated and determined that she was eligible for special education services for the retarded. Mrs. L. and Ms. Rotruck agreed to transfer the child to a class for the retarded. The child's attitude toward school and her performance both improved.<sup>7</sup>

Although at the national level, advocates for the disabled tend to push hard for an integrated classroom experience for nearly all special education students,<sup>8</sup> parents at Coles Elementary seem to make decisions on the basis of what they perceive is best for their child. And that may be a separate class, like Ms. Scheflen's or the one Mrs. L's daughter is in.

In fact, Ms. Rotruck said, in the 1999-2000 term, there were almost no core academic classes at Coles Elementary in which learning-disabled students were taught side-by-side with their non-disabled peers. All the pupils at the school take physical education, art, and music together. But for reading and math, special education services are delivered separately, in classes like Ms. Scheflen's.

Three factors are involved in Coles Elementary's movement away from mainstreaming the learning disabled. One is the budget formula. In the 1998-99 school year, the school had some

third-grade classes which were taught by both regular and special education teachers, with the pupils mixed. But this year's third grade did not have enough special education pupils to justify hiring full-time co-teachers. A second factor is the absence of parental insistence on mainstreaming. If a parent does insist, Ms. Rotruck's policy is to be accommodating. But they rarely insist. The main factor, though, is the preference of Ms. Rotruck and her staff. "I'm not convinced," she said, "that co-teaching works." In her experience, kids with learning disabilities, especially those with ADD, do better in separate classes, where they have fewer distractions and can receive more individual attention. That is what she tries to give them.

## The Physically Disabled

The learning disabled are not the only special education pupils at Coles Elementary, and some of the others are mainstreamed. The school has a special program for the hearing-impaired, which draws children from several surrounding neighborhoods. Three of the hearing-impaired kindergartners spend part of their day in a regular class.

This trio—Billy, Joey, and Luke—started a typical February day in Dawn Voysey's kindergarten class with perhaps 20 other pupils. The three boys wore "phonic ears," an apparatus carried by all the hearing-impaired children at the school. It consists of a power pack clipped to their belts and a set of headphones. The teacher or interpreter wears a microphone tuned to the boys' frequency. The idea is that the headset filters out any ambient noise and allows in only the sound the teacher is making, thus making it easier for the pupils to use what hearing they have. But it's not clear what, if anything, Billy, Joey, and Luke can hear. They appear to get along by responding to a multitude of cues.

Mrs. Voysey knows some rudimentary American Sign Language, but she relied on an interpreter to do most of the signing for the three deaf boys, who sat directly in front of her. Mrs. Voysey led the class in a song about a groundhog. The three boys appeared to enjoy it, but they didn't sing along. None of them can speak very well.

Mrs. Voysey moved on to a calendar lesson, and there the hearing-impaired boys had a chance to shine. It was the third day of February, and Luke got to pin the numeral three to the big calendar on the wall. It was also the 89th day of the current school term, and Mrs. Voysey asked if anyone knew what numerals are in the number "89." Luke raised his hand. Mrs. Voysey called on him. He made the signs for nine and eight and proudly sat down again. The class counted to 89. Billy, Joey, and Luke signed along.

The class did an alphabet recital, and Billy got to aim the pointer at the letters as Mrs. Voysey recited them and the children repeated after her. Then it was time for a numbers game. Mrs. Voysey held up a jar with a jumble of tickets inside. Each child guessed how many tickets he or she thought were in the jar. Joey guessed 22. Billy went along with Joey. When all the guesses were in, Mrs. Voysey counted the tickets. There were 23. Joey and Billy came closest. They

***In Mrs. Rotruck's experience, kids with learning disabilities, especially those with ADD, do better in separate classes, where they have fewer distractions and can receive more individual attention.***

exchanged high fives.

Joey and Billy are exuberant boys who seem almost unaware of their handicaps. Luke is quieter by nature and more reserved. They all, however, appeared to enjoy their time in Mrs. Voysey's class and to be accepted readily by the other children in it.

***The speech therapist's job is to find ways for hearing-impaired students to learn to make sounds they cannot hear.***

Several of the hearing children have picked up some of the signs for numbers, and they signed along with Billy, Joey, and Luke during the counting games.

After an hour the three boys were gathered by Linda White and escorted upstairs to the second floor of the school. Mrs. White, the school's speech therapist, works in a small, windowless room that was probably a storage closet when the school was opened in 1969. There is barely enough space for her chair and a small, curved table at which the boys sat.

Mrs. White's job is to find ways for the boys to learn to make sounds they cannot hear. It's not easy. She opened her mouth wide so the boys could see her lips and tongue move as she pronounced the "luh" sound of the letter "l." Then she held a mirror in front of each boy's mouth so he could see his own lips and tongue move as he tried to duplicate the sound. She put Billy's finger to her lips so he could feel the expulsion of breath as she made the sibilant sound for "s." She took his hand and put his fingers to his own lips to let him compare what came from his own mouth when he tried to imitate the sound.

The boys have varying degrees of speech ability. Joey, who has some residual hearing, can say words like "go" and "big" in a mechanical way, though putting words together into a sentence is beyond him at this stage. Luke is still working on sounds. Billy's speech is closer to Joey's than Luke's.

Mrs. White tried to integrate the speech work with their work on American Sign Language. She made the signs for each sound, letter, or word she asked the boys to say. She and the three boys seemed to be communicating on three levels—with sound, with signs, and with lips. The boys, far from being reticent about using their voices, seemed to delight in it. They cheered for one another's successes, calling out, "Yay!"

After speech therapy, the three boys returned, not to the mainstream class in which they had begun the day, but to a kindergarten class for the hearing-impaired. This class has eight children—seven of them boys. Several of them have additional problems. Joshua is autistic as well as hearing-impaired. David, in addition to being deaf, has cerebral palsy, which kept him from walking until he was nearly kindergarten age. He walks now with a stiff, clumsy gait, and he has not been toilet-trained. David also has a habit of biting. An additional aide has been assigned to the class to look after David. Juan and Lorenzo are children of Salvadoran immigrants. In addition to being hearing-impaired, they know no English, and their parents do not know sign language. All of the children in this class, like Billy, Joey, and Luke, wear the phonic ear apparatus.

If Billy, Joey, and Luke were put off by any of these problems, they showed no signs of it when

they joined the class. Within seconds, they were in the midst of a play period, running around the room, scrawling on chalkboards, playing with toys. After a couple of minutes, the teacher, Teresa Wyrick, signaled that play time was over. She brushed her hands together, the sign for “clean-up.” Mrs. Wyrick, a woman in her late twenties dressed in sweat clothes, hears normally. She chose to go into education for the hearing-impaired and got a master’s at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C.

Most of the boys, but not all, responded to Mrs. Wyrick’s signal and started dumping toys in boxes. David joined in the clean-up, and Mrs. Wyrick signed “thank you” and “good” to him. David beamed.

Mrs. Wyrick began a lesson on the days of the week. “Yesterday was Tuesday,” she said, speaking into the microphone mounted on her headset. At the same time, she made the signs for “yesterday” and “Tuesday.” She pointed to the word, “Tuesday,” on a wall display.

“Today is Wednesday,” she went on. Mrs. Wyrick is a warm, enthusiastic woman with an engaging smile. She was easily able to make a group of five-year-old boys believe that Wednesday is the best of all possible days of the week, and it seemed likely that on the following day they would think Thursday was just as swell. Joey obviously thought so. He smiled back at her, repeated the sign for Wednesday, and did his best to say the word aloud as well.

On to numbers. Mrs. Wyrick let Joey hold the pointer and point to each number as she led the boys in counting to 50 by fives and to 100 by tens. She moved closer to Joshua during this exercise, giving him a light hug, trying to help him to pay attention to the numbers. Joshua knows the numbers. But his autism tends to keep him out of sync with the rest of the class, and Mrs. Wyrick watches him closely most of the time, trying to keep him with the group.

She asked the children to sit on swatches of carpet and conducted a coin game. The boys, in turn, took coins and put them in envelopes posted on the bulletin board underneath large pictures of each coin and a number indicating its worth—one, five, ten, twenty-five, and fifty cents. Joshua, however, began to play with his coin like a wheel on the floor, seemingly lost in a reverie. Mrs. Wyrick noted that he was sitting on a floral carpet pattern instead of a plain one. The pattern, she said, can distract Joshua, taking his attention away from the class. She replaced Joshua’s floral carpet swatch with a plain beige one. Joshua didn’t rejoin the coin game, but he seemed, momentarily, to be paying attention again. David deposited his coin properly, but then he hobbled over to Joey and got in his face, making loud, incoherent sounds. Joey, perhaps because of his hearing impairment, did not seem to mind, and one of Mrs. Wyrick’s aides took David by the hand and returned him to his carpet swatch.

Mrs. Wyrick deftly switched the boys to a game of alphabet lotto; none of her class activities lasts more than about ten minutes. The boys used cards with letters and signs, working on their mastery of the American Sign Language (ASL) alphabet. Joshua, however, got obstreperous. He spat at Juan. Mrs. Wyrick, like a hockey referee, responded by putting Joshua in the penalty

***Joshua’s autism tends to keep him out of sync with the rest of the class, and Mrs. Wyrick watches him closely most of the time, trying to keep him with the group.***

box—a chair set by itself in front of the teacher’s desk, in the middle of a red box outlined in tape on the floor. Using a kitchen timer, she set the clock to tick off Joshua’s penalty: five minutes. One of the aides moved over toward Joshua and prodded him gently back into the box whenever he tried to leave.

Mrs. Wyrick made certain to include Joshua prominently in the next segment, a counting exercise, and Joshua displayed the mix of ability and disability characteristic of autism. With his attention engaged, he counted to 48, higher than anyone in the class. Then he lapsed into another reverie.

Mrs. Wyrick decided it was time to reward the boys, and she let Joey pass out the treat—a single piece of candy for each. The boys patiently waited their turn to grab their treats and eat them. “It’s an accomplishment that they all don’t try to grab at once,” Mrs. Wyrick said.

The candy consumed, Mrs. Wyrick decided to burn a little of the energy her charges had ingested. She set up an obstacle course around the perimeter of the room, pulling two small desks into the path along one wall, laying two ropes on the floor along the next wall, and placing a soft Nerf soccer ball along the third wall. Then she showed the boys how to run the course. She slithered under the desks (this, presumably, is why kindergarten teachers wear sweat clothes), jumped up, and hopped over the pieces of rope. Jogging around the corner, she got to the soccer ball and kicked it toward the smiling boys. One by one, they imitated her, waiting eagerly for her signal to start.

***Mrs. Wyrick deftly switched the boys to a game of alphabet lotto; none of her class activities lasts more than about ten minutes.***

When each boy had made two or three circuits, she had them sit at their desks and work on writing their names. Then they drew shapes on pieces of paper. Toward the end of the day, the class had a library period. They joined another hearing-impaired kindergarten class and started walking toward the library. David, for some reason he could not communicate, did not want to go. When his aide tried to take his hand and lead him, he bit her,

puncturing her skin. The class was delayed while the aide found some disinfectant and a Band-Aid and patched herself up.

In the library, the two classes gathered around the librarian. Their teachers joined them. So did the aides and an ASL interpreter. It was another display of the cost of special education: seven staff members were attending thirteen children. The librarian read a picture book about Abraham Lincoln. The interpreter signed. Some of the children seemed engaged by this; Billy did not. He wanted to converse with Joey. Hearing-impaired children can sometimes get away with this, since they make no noise when they engage in ASL conversations. But this time, Billy was caught. An aide banished him to a chair in the back row, and Billy sat there, face flushed, tears of shame dripping from his eyes.

The story ended, and the children had a few minutes to look at some of the books on the shelves. Joey, an elfin boy who plows through life with a smile on his face, pulled two books out as if he knew exactly where they would be. One was about trains, and the other was about

alligators. He sat happily on the floor, leafing through the books one at a time, absorbing the pictures.

Alligators and trains are two of Joey's passions. Both of Joey's parents hear normally. His mother worked in a bank but quit shortly before Joey was born. His father has a job handling computer security for Prince William County Schools. Joey has two siblings, an eleven-year-old sister and a six-year-old brother. They, too, hear fine.

Joey's parents do not know precisely what caused his deafness. They believe he was born hearing normally. But when he was about a year old, he fell suddenly and mysteriously ill. He vomited and couldn't hold his head upright, though he had no fever. Joey's mother took him to the hospital, where the doctors couldn't find anything specifically wrong with him or say what had caused his illness. After a two-and-one-half day hospitalization, Joey seemed back to normal. The doctors sent him home.

***Joey's parents, like the parents of Andrew, the boy with learning disabilities, dealt with a burden of guilt.***

But as the months passed, Joey's parents noticed that he wasn't normal. He didn't speak. He didn't respond to sounds, such as the ringing of the doorbell, that stimulated his older brother. He didn't respond to his parents' voices when they spoke to him from behind. They had him tested and learned that he had a moderate-to-severe hearing impairment. His doctors guessed that it was caused by the bout of illness when he was a year old. Retroactively, they diagnosed it as encephalopathy, a catch-all term for illnesses of the brain.

"It was devastating," Joey's mother recalled in an interview.<sup>9</sup> "You don't ever think it will happen to you. You sit and wonder, 'What do I do with a disabled child?'"

Joey's parents, like the parents of Andrew, the boy with learning disabilities, dealt with a burden of guilt. "Because no one could say for sure why this had happened to him, you think, 'Did I do something wrong when I was pregnant with him? Did I get him to the hospital in time?'" she recalled. With time, those questions fade into the back of a parent's mind. But they never go away.

Joey's grandmother played an important, supportive role in this crisis. "She kept reminding us that Joey was a very normal boy. He's stubborn, headstrong. He's not very conscious of his disability. He wants to learn, wants to be a part of things. And he makes sure he is."

Joey's family adjusted. His parents continued to read stories to him. They watched movies and television together. They continued to talk to him, taking care to speak up and make sure he could see their faces when they wanted to communicate. They took a class in sign language and learned the basic signs appropriate for a young child. His older brother shared a room with Joey, and the two boys developed a rough, effective way of communicating, mixing signs, words, and a bit of shoving. Joey's mother has noticed, with gratitude, that when the boys go outside, his brother and sister look out for him, trying to protect him from being teased or picked on.

For all that, Joey still faces limitations and challenges. His mother sees that he has been slower to read and write than his older brother. The older boy plays video games and takes Tae Kwon Do lessons. Joey, thus far, is content to watch. He can be a bit reclusive at times. And, of course, his mother constantly worries about the oncoming car that Joey won't hear.

Discovering the preschool program for the hearing-impaired at Coles was a relief to Joey's parents, in part because he took to it immediately and well. He began at the age of two. "He loved being there," his mother recalled. "He was so much happier around other hearing-impaired kids."

Like Andrew's parents, Joey's parents developed an alliance with the special education teachers they found at Coles, depending on them for expertise and advice. Joey's teacher in preschool was Jill Burns, a young woman who is herself hearing-impaired. Joey's parents asked her opinion about a cochlear implant for him. Many members of the deaf community oppose cochlear implants (Ms. Rotruck has heard it compared to trying to change the color of one's skin), and Ms. Burns advised Joey's parents against the operation. They took her advice and have not pursued the issue.

***Down the road, Joey's parents know he will have to make choices between the hearing world and the deaf world. Which classroom he prefers will be one of the first of those choices.***

Similarly, they have accepted the recommendations of the school staff about mainstreaming Joey. During preschool, Joey stayed in a special class for the hearing-impaired. When he began kindergarten, Ms. Rotruck and her staff recommended that Joey spend a small part of the day in a Mrs. Voysey's mixed class with an interpreter. But he spends the bulk of his day in the hearing-impaired class with Mrs. Wyrick.

That was fine with Joey's parents. "We were worried about putting him in a mainstream kindergarten class," his mother recalled. "But the teachers said he would do all right, and

he has. We aren't worried now."

All other things being equal, his parents would like to see him spend more time in mainstream classes as his education progresses. But, says his mother, "It's not the principal issue. Joey has to be where he does the best he can. If that turns out to be a hearing-impaired class, fine. As long as it's determined on the basis of his interests."

She expects that she and her husband will be swayed, in part, by Joey's own preferences. For the moment, he seems to like both his hearing-impaired class and his mainstream class equally well. Down the road, they know he will have to make choices between the hearing world and the deaf world. Which classroom he prefers will be one of the first of those choices. But that choice is in the future.

At present, they are guided both by what they perceive to be Joey's best interests and by the advice of the teachers at Coles Elementary. That suggests a continuing, cautious, and undogmatic experimentation with the mainstream class. Ms. Rotruck says she is pleased with

how Billy, Joey, and Luke are doing with Mrs. Voysey. She will probably recommend more time in a regular class in first grade.

## Evaluating the Program

Joey's adulthood, of course, is still just a speck on the horizon, and it is impossible to predict how well his eventual dreams and aspirations will be served by the special education program at Coles Elementary. But that is true of everyone in the special education program. Evaluating precisely how well the program serves them is difficult.

Andrew, for example, came to Ms. Scheflen roughly two years behind his peers in key reading and writing skills. Ms. Scheflen thinks that, after two years of special education, he's made up about half that gap. But he still has persistent, basic problems, like his tendency to mix up the letters b and d. How well he will do in middle school or beyond is open to question.

***Children with broken legs usually, in time, get rid of their crutches, and walk more or less normally, perhaps even run. Special education students by and large will always have the equivalent of a limp.***

For Andrew, it may not matter. His father noted that Andrew has often expressed an interest in taking over the family lawn-care business, and his mother can always use help at Christmas time in the honey-glazed ham business. Andrew may find a niche in the economy that doesn't require first-rate reading skills. Such niches, say some of the special education teachers at Coles Elementary, are where they've seen a lot of their pupils wind up over the years. "I would say that 80 percent of the special education students go into fields where they don't have to use absent skills," Ms. Rotruck said.

There are occasional pleasant exceptions. Ms. Rotruck recalled a girl named Mandy who had problems with reading and written language. Mandy was in a mainstream class for math, but she got special education in language arts. "We pushed Mandy pretty hard," Ms. Rotruck said. "We gave her a lot of positive reinforcement, we taught her how to manage things, to compensate." Mandy learned. Not long ago, Ms. Rotruck said, Mandy dropped by for a visit and informed her that she was working on a book.

But Mandy was unusual, Ms. Rotruck added. For the most part, "There is no magic to special education. The program doesn't resolve a child's disability." She compared a child with a learning disability to a child with a broken leg. Special education may provide such a child with the equivalent of a crutch that helps him or her get up and get around.

But there the analogy to a broken leg tends to break down. Children with broken legs usually, in time, get rid of their crutches, and walk more or less normally, perhaps even run. Special education students by and large will always have the equivalent of a limp. They may find ways to get around, but they do not become sprinters.

Statistics to back up the anecdotal evidence offered by teachers like Ms. Rotruck are hard to

find. Prince William County's Board of Education has tried to evaluate the special education program, according to Board president Lucy S. Beauchamp.<sup>10</sup> But would-be evaluators run into an immediate snag. It's difficult to measure the effectiveness of the program without a control group of pupils with disabilities who did not receive special education. Such a control group would be inconceivable—to say nothing of illegal.

Mrs. Beauchamp said the Board of Education in Prince William County has nevertheless commissioned a consulting company to audit the special education program and see how it's doing. "We want to be delivering services that improve the students' performance," she said. "We don't want to run a baby-sitting service."

Statewide statistics collected by the Virginia Department of Education, though, suggest that for a significant number of learning-disabled students, the ideal paradigm—normal children who perform normally after receiving a little special help—is a myth. In the 1999 statewide Standard of Learning test for third graders, for instance, 39 percent of all students failed the reading and writing test. For students with learning disabilities, the failure rate was about twice as high—75

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percent. Roughly the same pattern prevailed for all grade levels tested. Among all fifth graders, the failure rate on the reading SOL test was 31 percent; among students with learning disabilities, it was 64 percent. Of all eighth graders, 33 percent failed the reading test; among eighth graders with learning disabilities, the failure rate was 73 percent. Among high school seniors, the reading failure rate was 25 percent, but for learning-disabled students it was 67 percent. The data suggest that in Virginia, learning-disabled students generally don't catch up.<sup>11</sup>

Virginia has had to make accommodations for special education students in its graduation requirements. Some 25 percent of special education students statewide opt out of trying to pass the tests for a

standard diploma and instead get a "special diploma." The state is also discussing whether to add a third option, a "basic diploma" for special education students who demonstrate competency in reading, writing, and math and complete some occupational training.<sup>12</sup>

## Some Thoughts on Reform

Regardless of how many of its students will go on to pass the SOL tests, Coles Elementary School suggests several important observations about special education that are often ignored and occasionally distorted in media reports dealing with the subject.

First, the teachers who deliver special education services are an extraordinary group. On a daily basis, they display patience, skill, enthusiasm and concern—even love—for pupils who are, on many occasions, hard to love.

Second, the problems that bring students into special education are real. There may well be

some cases at Coles Elementary where pupils with nearly identical abilities received different diagnoses, with one being sent to special education and the other branded as “slow” and left in a regular class. But there are probably not many. And there appear to be no students in the school’s special education classes who don’t need help. This may not be the case further up the educational ladder, however, where there may be growing numbers of students seeking accommodations such as extra time on tests for questionable learning disabilities. But it is true at Coles Elementary School.

Third, although it is no doubt true, as Tom Carter suspects, that there are occasions when parents can push the system to admit a child with a marginal learning disability into special education, parental pushing does not seem to be a common route into the program. It is far more likely that the child’s first- and second-grade teachers, noticing a lack of progress, initiate the evaluation. The parents then go along with the school’s decision. Parents may dream of the day their child graduates from college, or scores a winning touchdown, or takes over the family business. But it seems safe to say that few parents, on their way home from the maternity hospital, dream of their child’s first day in special education.

Fourth, the intense emphasis placed by advocates for the learning disabled on the least restrictive environment for a child—which usually means a mainstream classroom—seems oddly divorced from the reality of a school like Coles Elementary. So does the media attention given to lawsuits by parents of disabled pupils who insist on mainstream class rooms for their children. The reality at Coles Elementary is that parents rely on the teachers and the principal for advice, and that advice often sends the child to a separate class with the consent of all concerned.

A fifth and final observation flows from the first four; if Coles Elementary is any indication, there are no quick or easy solutions to the financial and educational problems posed by learning disabilities.

Certainly, a few days spent at Coles Elementary School suggested that the special education system needs examination and improvement. There is much room for debate about the funding mechanism—which separates the primary responsibility for raising money from the responsibility for setting admissions criteria and selecting students for evaluation. As matters now stand, local government, the entity which bears the funding burden, has little or no control over which and how many students receive services. That authority rests with federal and state governments, which determine the rules, and with parents and teachers, who have the most influence in selection. It’s a system seemingly designed to grow in cost each year. And it may, in Virginia at least, tend to delay the delivery of special education services for children who need them, until they can demonstrate a “23-point gap” that, as is required in Prince Williams County, in turn may mean that children stay in special education longer, make less progress, and wind up costing the system more money.

There is also room to question whether the selection process is too arbitrary at the margin,

***As matters now stand, local government, the entity which bears the funding burden, has little or no control over which and how many students receive services.***

selecting some students and not others based more on the quirks of parents, teachers, and psychologists on objective measures of aptitude and performance.

There is much room for improvement in monitoring the results the system produces, although more detailed monitoring might conflict with another desirable reform, a reduction in time and money devoted to paperwork and red tape.

Last, there is room for debate on whether the agenda of professional advocates for the disabled, which puts such a premium on mainstreaming and least restrictive environments, is the right one for disabled students, particularly those with learning disabilities. It may well be that professionals like Ms. Rotruck are correct in thinking that many such children do best in separate classes.

But Coles Elementary also suggests that would-be reformers of special education ought to be careful about how much they promise. It suggests that there is a substantial population of children who, under any rational evaluation system, will be found to have learning disabilities. They require and deserve special help. And that help cannot be inexpensive.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of all Coles students in this paper were changed to protect their privacy.

<sup>2</sup> Data from U.S. Census Bureau at <<<http://www.census.gov/statab/USA98/51/153.txt>>>.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Tom Carter, January 19, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Funding data from a telephone interview with David Cline, director of finance, Prince William County Schools, February 22, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Candace Rotruck, February 2, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew's parents were interviewed separately on February 14 and 16, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Mrs. JoAnne L., February 16, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the report to President Clinton by the National Council on Disabilities, January 25, 2000, entitled "Back to School on Civil Rights—Advancing the Federal Commitment to Leave No Child Behind" at <<[http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/backtoschool\\_1.html](http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/backtoschool_1.html)>>.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Joey's mother, February 14, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Telephone interview with Lucy S. Beauchamp, February 17, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Taken from unpublished raw data files provided by the Office of Special Education and Student Services, Virginia Department of Education.

<sup>12</sup> "New Diploma Proposed for Special-Ed in Va.," *The Washington Post*, February 3, 2000, page B-2.