Integrating Special and General Education in Fairfax County Public Schools

By Ariana Zukergood, Roosevelt @ Cornell University

Thesis
To address Fairfax County’s segregation of special and general education departments, the local government should pass legislation that funds teacher training for integrated classrooms and mandates enrollment of every high school student in at least one integrated class yearly.

Background Analysis
As a minority group, people with disabilities have been marginalized citizens throughout U.S. history. When the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed in 1990, conditions improved drastically for people with disabilities in the United States; however, there is still significant segregation of special and general education. This distinct separation is increasingly evident in Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) and promotes a societal stigma around disability that creates unconscious bias among non-disabled students. Furthermore, the separation of the departments leaves disabled students at a disadvantage regarding social exposure, employment opportunities, and higher education options. This division of public schools impacts not only current students, but all FCPS teachers and the families of disabled students.

Although Fairfax County previously attempted to address this polarization through directives such as Programs for Children with Disabilities (Directive #2670), the systematic breakdown of this policy lies in its indirect, supplementary approach. While supplementary programs are beneficial, the real solution to fighting the social stigma of disability among young people in United States will be found in actual integration. Ultimately, integration will normalize the concept of disability for students, thereby rendering obsolete the unconscious bias that currently dominates employment and higher education decisions.

Talking Points
- Lawmakers should mandate integration by requiring every high school student to enroll in at least one combined class per year
- Integration would result in increase in better employment and higher education opportunities for disabled individuals
- Advocates should focus on progressing the United States’ disability model to further encapsulate the ideals of the social model

Policy Idea
My proposal is for the Fairfax County local government to mandate that high school students enroll in at least one integrated class yearly as a graduation requirement. The government should make this possible by funding the

KEY FACTS
- On average, disabled employees receive $478 from Supplement Security Income payouts
- A survey of 255 supervisors of disabled workers found that disabled employees perform at least as well as and usually better than their non-disabled coworkers
- The cost of most accommodations for disabled workers is below $500, yet the costs of turnover to a company are between 30 and 50 percent of entry-level employees’ annual salaries, suggesting that it is cost effective to make reasonable accommodations.
training of teachers to prepare them to handle integrated classrooms. This would ensure sustained equal education and a more equitable level of preparation for employment and higher education. Furthermore, this policy would simultaneously decrease the next generation’s level of unconscious bias toward disabled people and entail positive economic externalities.

Policy Analysis

This policy would normalize disability and integrate the lives of future generations while increasing higher education and employment opportunities for disabled individuals.

In the long run, the opportunities produce both local and national economic benefits through a decreased unemployment rate and a decrease in turnover for local businesses. According to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics, out of the entire 2015 civilian non-institutional population there was a 5.1 percent unemployment rate for persons without disabilities and a 10.7 percent unemployment rate for disabled persons, which indicates that increasing the employment of disabled citizens would yield a lower unemployment rate nationally. Furthermore, the case study of SunTrust’s proactive hiring of disabled individuals reports that “after hiring the first employee with a disability, the manager found that employee morale and productivity had increased and turnover had noticeably decreased,” 1 substantiating the economic benefits to local businesses.

Previously, the government instituted a quota system for specified employers to hire more disabled workers. However, this not only is ineffective, as the unemployment rate of disabled individuals is still twice that of non-disabled workers, but also targets the symptoms of the problem rather than the problem itself. This policy would make a quota unnecessary by better preparing disabled individuals for long-term employment.

Next Steps

The FCPS School Board must initiate the aforementioned high school graduation requirement and lobby for the county government to provide funding for training of teachers in preparation for integrated classrooms. However, all families and friends of disabled students, disabled citizens living in the county, FCPS teachers, and taxpayers must attend school board meetings and write to their representatives in support of this policy in order to ensure its implementation. Specifically, these allies should target School Board Member at Large Ryan McElveen, who has previously stood by initiatives to improve the education of disabled students in Fairfax County.

End Notes

1 "Dispelling Myths." *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* 92:18 (2000).