

Stand Up for Students Day
21 February 2018
Montpelier, VT

Marielle Blais

I'm Marielle Blais, a speech-language pathologist at Otter Valley Union Middle and High School in Brandon. Thank you for including me in your busy schedules. February break would not seem complete without this annual visit to talk to Dave Sharpe and his committee members about public education in Vermont.

In preparation for speaking to legislators I pulled together a few numbers about special education students on IEPs at OV. These 76 students in grades 7 through 12 make up 15% of the student body. Their primary disabilities are as follows:

Primary Disability	No. of Students	%age of Total Sped Pop.
Emotional Disturbance	16	21%
ADHD	15	20%
Specific Learning Disability	14	18%
Autism Spectrum Disorder	12	16%
Intellectual Disability (IQ 78 and below)	9	12%
Speech/Language	5	6%
Other, Low Incidence (e.g., Visual Impairment)	5	6%

Of these 76 students 20 (26%) have multiple secondary disabilities. For example, only 5 students have a speech and language impairment as their primary disability, but I currently have 26 students on my caseload since speech and language are nearly always affected by disabilities such as learning or intellectual disabilities and autism. Of the five full-time SLPs in the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union (RNESU), my caseload is one of if not the largest. I know personally or by reputation most of the 76 students on IEPs at OV and I can assure you that we are not over identifying. I don't have access to student Medicaid eligibility, but I know that it is typically about 80% for students on IEPs. As you can imagine these students, with their diagnoses and family histories, are among the most vulnerable in our communities. Their needs are great and their futures are often uncertain.

Though I earn my living working with special ed students I was surprised, as some of you may be, that the primary disability category with the greatest number of students at RNESU is emotional disability. Last year I was impressed with the teaching style of a new teacher at OV. When I asked him about his teaching background, he surprised me by saying it was his first year teaching. Previously he'd worked as a mental health counselor and it showed. Teachers are not counselors, but maybe we should be. Unless teacher training programs have changed greatly, newly licensed teachers do not receive adequate

training in emotional disturbance and trauma. Any effort we can put toward making this training available to educators will not be wasted. Teacher inservice, which administrators seem to love, but teachers often dread as precious time misspent, would be an excellent opportunity for trauma training. Last year I was a voluntary member of a trauma informed study group led by a colleague at OV. We met after school, attended the Rowland Foundation Annual Conference, and invited a psychologist to one of our inservices to talk to our full OV faculty and administration about recognizing and responding to trauma in our students. I recommend this and similar models.

Many of you are familiar with recent studies and recommendations from UVM and the District Management Group about special ed funding and service delivery models, in particular those that would reduce the number of paras and increase the number of special educators so that our most challenging students would not be receiving instruction from some of our least qualified educators. I don't know how these recommendations could work given the shortage and attrition rate of special educators, the essential role paras play in special education, and the increased cost of hiring licensed teachers in place of paras. While I have observed some minimally trained paras who function more as special educators with minimal supervision, they are an unfortunate exception. Many of our paras have bachelors degrees and years of on the job if not formal training. They receive minimal professional development, which I think is a huge disservice. Paras are some of the best candidates for becoming special educators. What would special education look like if paras received the education and training many of them desire and earned their associates and/or bachelors degrees and certification in special education? They already know the field and might prefer teaching over working two or three jobs to try to support themselves. One para I know either has or is close to finishing her bachelors degree and is working on completing her student teaching in English language arts. She'd like to be certified in special education, but that would create more obstacles than the ones she is already encountering. I invited her to join me today, but she can't afford to take time off from her second job. AOE needs to be more creative in finding ways of supporting working people trying to become licensed teachers.

There are some outdated and persistent notions about special ed service delivery models. Yes, many of us provide specialized instruction to small groups, which in Vermont are defined as up to six students with one special educator. If we used only this model, we'd never be able to fit into our schedules all the students we teach. At OV most of us spend the bulk of our time in classrooms providing academic support to students on IEPs. These students and their classmates usually know we are there for specific students, but there are a couple of reasons why we try to blend in as much as possible. Special ed students generally do not like being singled out, especially in middle and high school. Other students in the class also benefit from our services. When we work in small groups within the classroom, our groups consist of students on IEPs and their peers working together on class assignments. During whole group instruction we are available not only to our designated students but to other students who need extra help completing assignments. Several of the teachers and I feel comfortable having me sub for them when no other sub is available. If a sub is unfamiliar with the curriculum, we have been known to switch roles so that I teach the class while the sub provides extra support for students who need it. (The shortage of subs and their lack of training are topics for another day.)

Special ed paras often develop specialty areas by grade and/or subject. Except for times when I'm providing academic support in a classroom every day, I typically see students about two half hours per week on a schedule that makes it hard for real teaching to take place. I depend on paras to keep me up to speed on classroom assignments, quizzes, and tests so that I can make the best use of my time with students. A para I especially appreciate in this role also happens to be the spouse of Steve Carr, one of your fellow House champions of public education.

One approach to special ed services has special educators and SLPs providing their own specialized curriculums in addition to assigned classwork and homework. I do this myself, but I also believe that special educators can weave student IEP goals and objectives into the coursework rather than creating additional work for students already stressed by the demands of their classes.

I want to go on record as saying that I, for one, am in favor of any legislation that reduces the onerous and, to me, demoralizing special education paperwork burden.

I urge you to move slowly and carefully in your consideration of making recommendations for changing the models for special education funding and service delivery. Education is inherently difficult and slow--it took me 12 years to graduate from high school!

Thank you for joining us in the battle against vilification of educators and their unions. I look forward to meeting with you again next year. In the meantime I'll continue the challenging work of helping students appreciate that receiving help is not the exception, but the norm--no one works alone, everyone needs help.

Marielle Blais, PhD, CCC-SLP
Otter Valley Union Middle and High School
2997 Franklin Street
Brandon, VT 05733