

Cashing In On Special-Needs Kids



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Raising a child with autism requires extra vigilance. Just ask Minneapolis parent Marcia Haugstad. Her son, Noah, has an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis and is beginning high school this fall after many difficult years as a Minneapolis public school student. Once, as a kindergartener, Noah panicked in his regular education classroom and bolted out the door. He was about to set foot in a busy nearby street when a teacher happened to see him, just in time.

Then, in fourth grade, Noah told his mom about the classroom “superbullies” who were teasing him. With inadequate support from teachers and specialists, Noah began lashing out, scratching other kids, and refusing to leave the house in the morning. For the first time in his life, he had to be physically restrained by a teacher.

He even became suicidal. Haugstad vividly recalls Noah telling her, in great detail, how he planned to kill himself by tying a belt around his neck.

Mental health problems are a companion to autism, Haugstad says, because kids like Noah are often very aware that they are different, and don’t fit in. Unpredictable and sometimes violent meltdowns are characteristic of “high-functioning” autistic kids; after the episode fades, the child is often awash in a sea of remorse.

It takes a careful hand to guide a child like Noah, and that’s what Haugstad eventually found for him, through the Minneapolis public schools’ highly regarded citywide autism program. The district has offered this intensive program for the last twenty years, as Minnesota’s autism population has steadily grown, particularly among the state’s white and Somali residents.

In this program, which parents say has provided crucial access to like-minded peers, kids with autism can spend time in both mainstream and special education classrooms.

After Noah's violent and suicidal episodes as a fourth grader, Haugstad contacted the school district. She insisted he be moved to one of the specialized autism sites, where he could have the best of both worlds: access to a mainstream classroom, for his academic needs; and the support of highly trained autism teachers and support staff, to help him learn how to cope with his lifelong condition.

At Minneapolis's Ramsey School, Haugstad says, Noah found a "phenomenal advocate" in autism teacher Patrice Gregor. When Noah's fight-or-flight response set in, as it often does for autistic kids in overstimulating classrooms, Gregor followed him out. Once, he stuffed himself in a locker and bit Gregor, hard, when she pried open the door.

Still, she stayed by his side and slowly built trust with Noah. Since then, Haugstad says, her son has flourished. He no longer receives psychological counseling for emotional problems, and he has earned high marks for his school work.

Now, as her son enters the ninth grade, Haugstad is fighting to try to save the citywide autism program that helped him become the stable kid he is today.

Haugstad was shocked to discover—in June, after the school year had ended—that the words "citywide autism program" had been scrubbed from Noah's personal education plan, which every special education student is legally entitled to have. He had also been denied a spot at the city's Southwest High School, which has a well-established autism program with multiple, specifically trained teachers. Instead, he was placed at his neighborhood high school, which lacks a strong, consistent autism program.

Haugstad fears the district is moving to dismantle the autism-specific classrooms her son has benefitted from. And she thinks she knows why: A shadowy, out-of-state outfit called the District Management Council has been rewriting special ed policy.

In 2013, the Minneapolis Public Schools signed up for a special education audit, to be done by the Boston-based outfit that caters to school districts around the country. Through million-dollar contracts—like the one it has with Minneapolis, worth \$980,000 and up for renewal in 2015—the District Management Council promises that its consultants will help school districts revamp that Achilles' heel of public education: expensive but mandatory special education services.

The Council's website says its goal is to improve the "lives and learning of students with special needs while reducing costs to school budgets and taxpayers." But in Minneapolis, parents like Haugstad contend that the school district, under austerity-minded guidance, is putting cost-cutting before the needs of their kids.

The district has consistently said changes to its autism program are about "inclusion," or a desire to serve special ed students in general education classrooms. Minneapolis's special education director, Rochelle Cox, sent a letter to special education teachers on June 23, saying the district was "reallocating" some resources from the citywide program in order to "provide special education services to students with autism in their community school."

According to Cox's letter, "Inclusion provides opportunities for both nondisabled youth and youth with disabilities to navigate childhood together." But nationally, there has been a push to cut special education funding and services, often under the guise of "inclusion." In July, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that the city's schools planned to cut \$200 million from its budget, noting that district officials thought they could save \$42 million by "modifying services" for the 50,000 special ed students the city serves.

Also in July, teachers in Newark, New Jersey, reported being told to call special ed parents and read a district-prepared script encouraging them to refuse special ed services in favor of an "all-inclusion" model. Newark blogger Bob Braun obtained the script and described it as something an appliance salesperson might be asked to read.

In Minneapolis, parents like Haugstad say they have always been able to send their special ed student to the closest school or to the most inclusive classroom setting, often depending on the advice and input of experienced special ed professionals. Now they say their right to have their children placed in an optimal special ed setting is being undermined, with zero communication from school district officials.

The parents responded with force, setting up a new advocacy group called "ChARM" (Children's Autism Rights Minneapolis), whipping up a Change.org petition that quickly gathered more than 5,000 signatures, and going to the media with complaints about how administrators were handling the district's special education programming.

From Arizona to Connecticut, Minnesota to Wisconsin, Rhode Island and beyond, the District Management Council operates an exclusive “member network” of public school districts, which, for a fee of \$25,000 per year, have bought the Kool-Aid the Council sells about lowering costs while serving students better.

“We believe leadership and management matters,” the Council’s website declares in bold type. There is no similar declaration of belief in the parents, teachers, or students who will have to abide by the decisions that management, under the Council’s guidance, will make.

District Management Council CEO John J-H Kim, a Harvard Business School graduate, worked for McKinsey and Company as a consultant before becoming the founding CEO of the for-profit “school management company” Chancellor Beacon Academies—a fact notably absent from his LinkedIn page, perhaps for good reason. Kim’s stint at Chancellor Beacon Academies ended in 2004, when the company—facing dim financial prospects and accusations of mismanaging schools—became part of Imagine Schools, a national charter school overseer plagued by a string of scandals.

Kim then went to work for online marketing firm Rakuten—known for its “pay for performance” approach to marketing—before landing at the Council as an expert consultant for the budding market-based education reform industry.

The Council’s president and chief special education reform master is Nathan Levenson, another Harvard MBA grad.

Levenson authored a 2012 report, “Boosting the Quality and Efficiency of Special Education,” for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a right-wing, pro-school choice think tank based in Ohio. The report acts as a blueprint for the special education work done by Council consultants.

The introduction to Levenson’s report offers this declaration (written by Fordham Institute employees Chester Finn and Michael Petrilli): “Perhaps no challenge in American schooling is as perplexing and underexamined as special education, particularly its costs, its benefits, and the relationship between them.”

Public school districts, by virtue of the 1975 Individuals with Disabilities Act, must provide adequate services for special education students. But the money has never adequately followed the mandate, and many districts struggle to cover the cost of educating all kids.

In Minneapolis, for example, where 18 percent of district kids qualify for special ed, \$1,400 must come out of every child’s per-pupil, general education fund dollars just to cover the district’s special ed services. This is tough, given the declining support—both financial and political—many school districts are facing.

And the District Management Council knows this.

Levenson’s report bemoans the high costs of special education: “Even the recent financial crisis has done little to quench [special ed’s] appetite for additional funds.” His premise is that public education is a dysfunctional, costly mess that outsiders must discipline into shape.

Among the “dysfunctions” he identifies are “an inclination to throw ‘more people’ at any problem” and “a reluctance to look at cost-effectiveness.” He asserts that “most school leaders equate ‘achievement’ with additional services, not more learning.” And he argues that special education students are pampered, with paraprofessionals becoming their “best friend.”

Levenson offers solutions for districts to consider. Step one: Cut special education staff, whose work doesn’t necessarily translate into more “proficiency” on tests for students. He argues that getting rid of excess staff in U.S. districts with above-average staffing levels “would collectively free up over \$10 billion a year.”

But cutting staff, Levenson warns, will not be easy, given “the challenges posed by collective bargaining agreements, political pressures . . . and vocal parents who adore small classes and extra help for their children.” He urges firing special education teachers—who must have smaller caseloads—and making “better” use of general education teachers, who can teach more kids at one time.

It is a kind of austerity agenda for special-needs kids. And its goal seems clear and one-dimensional: outcomes. Standardized, test-based outcomes.

After contracting with the Minneapolis Public Schools in 2013, the District Management Council put out an audit in 2014, titled “Special Education Opportunities Review.” True to Levenson’s report, the group’s recommendations for Minneapolis boil down to moving special education kids into regular classrooms.

The audit's executive summary calls for "a measured, balanced approach toward instituting changes that is respectful of all students, families, and staff."

But many Minneapolis parents and district special education staff say the Council's posture has been anything but measured and balanced. Donna Asher, who has worked in the city's autism program since 2000, calls Council consultants "a bunch of pompous outsiders who came in and looked at how much money we were spending, and not what best practices we were using."

Asher questions whether the Council was needed in Minneapolis at all: "Why are we asking some 'expert' to come in and assess what we're doing? Why can't we do this ourselves?" The only input Asher says special ed teachers had with the Council was through a "teachers survey," which she says was poorly written.

"It asked questions to get us talking about how we spend our days and our time, and missed the whole boat about what we do." The Council's survey and audit, Asher says, were simplistic and showed a "lack of awareness of individual needs."

The Council's audit also had a harrowing and immediate impact on the district's special education staff, when they were told by district administrators, midyear, that their longtime special education director was being transferred to a new position.

The reason? Asher says employees were told she "wasn't supporting the direction of special education," as dictated by the Council and the district leaders who hired the firm. At the same time, another longtime special education administrator retired—under duress, according to Asher—leaving a gaping hole in leadership.

Two new special education administrators were put in place, and change began to roll swiftly through the district—often without informing or including parents and teachers. Nowhere is this being felt more keenly—or protested more vocally—than in the district's citywide autism program.

The changes that have raised alarms in Minneapolis are complex, but parents and teachers say they amount to splintering the program. Autism advocates claim the Minneapolis Public Schools has not fully informed new parents that their children can attend a citywide site, where resources are more plentiful.

Minneapolis has also let some permanent staff members go, and has replaced them with a few "itinerant" autism teachers, as the school district calls them.

Another fear is that students are being swept under a broad "special education" umbrella. This means kids with autism will be put into the same room with kids with other diagnoses. Efficient, maybe, but a lousy outcome for kids like Noah.

One Minneapolis parent, who asked that her name not be used, says her autistic daughter has been physically and sexually assaulted at school. The assaults happened when the girl was put into an understaffed special education resource room with kids who have an emotional behavior disorder.

"Autism Spectrum Disorder kids don't understand social situations or know to watch for manipulations," the mother says. She would like to see a renewed emphasis on trained, skilled teachers and assistants who understand autism and can pierce the stereotypes that follow autistic kids, including the notion that they are simply "spoiled brats."

The mother met with school officials in August. She says her daughter's school has a new social worker, who suggested she be supervised "100 percent of the time" to prevent another assault. "It breaks my heart to think the school district does not have the confidence in their program, teachers, and students to create a scenario where an eight-year-old with disabilities could be safe in their care," the mother says.

As for Noah, his mother, Marcia, also met with school officials to discuss the upcoming school year. Haugstad says she was "verbally assured" that Noah's federally mandated education plan would be adhered to, but she already sees a sign of trouble. In the spring of 2015, Noah's "phenomenal advocate," autism teacher Patrice Gregor, was on her way, because of impending layoffs, to becoming the only autism teacher at the K-8 school Noah attended.

Wanting to avoid this, she applied for a teaching job at the high school where Noah and several of her other students were being sent. She didn't get the job. Haugstad is frustrated and worried. Noah has regressed before when given inadequate support for his autism. As he enters high school, she is afraid that history will repeat itself.