

## **Why so many students in special education?**

By Kathleen Schuler

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The Minneapolis Public School's recent teacher realignment highlights the increasing demand for special education services, but doesn't address why there's a rising need. ("Teacher realignment: where are they now?" Aug. 23-Sept 5.)

Of the 37 Southwest public school teachers reassigned to new schools or new subjects, 70 percent were moved to special education. Special education encompasses learning disabilities, mental retardation, autism, emotional or behavior problems, physical disabilities, blindness, deafness, developmental delays and speech deficits.

Has Southwest's demand for special education teachers risen? In short, yes.

Despite enrollment declines in special education and overall, a higher share of city public school students are in special education. In 2003, 14.7 percent of city public school students received special education, up from 12.7 percent in 1997. Over the same time period, students with autism increased from 2 percent to 5 percent of special-education students.

Improved screening and diagnosis probably accounts for some of the increase, but not all. Mounting evidence suggests that the actual number of kids with autism and other learning and behavioral disabilities has increased.

Why are we seeing this special-needs increase? There are many factors, but environmental pollution is an important, yet little-recognized contributor. Children are widely exposed to brain toxins in their immediate environment, beginning at conception. Science has clearly demonstrated exposure in the womb or in infancy to lead, alcohol and tobacco smoke can lead to learning, attention and IQ deficits, and hyperactivity.

Growing evidence also implicates pesticides, mercury, PCBs and other toxic chemicals. New studies find that fetuses are exposed routinely to the class of organophosphate insecticides that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) considers the most toxic. Mercury is another potent neurotoxin. The most recent EPA data indicates that an estimated 630,000 newborns each year could be at risk for learning or developmental problems because of mercury in their mothers' bodies. Studies show that children of women who consumed more mercury-tainted fish had measurable declines in attention, IQ, language development, gross motor skills and memory. The EPA and the Minnesota Department of Health warn women of childbearing age and young children to watch their intake of fish due to mercury contamination.

The exciting thing about linking children's development to environmental contaminants is that we can prevent at least some future disabilities. All we have to do is look for

opportunities to stop our children from being exposed to the brain toxins in their environment now.

Such prevention would not only save school dollars, but social service and criminal justice costs. An estimated 42 percent of adults in correctional institutions are eligible for special education programs. Likewise, almost 40 percent of adults with learning disabilities have difficulties with employment or social adjustment.

While we continue to serve students with special needs in the best way we can, let's also try to prevent future problems.

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