Anoka-Hennepin School District Superintendent Dennis Carlson, and Director of Special Education Mary Clarkson

Chronic underfunding of general education harms districts more than high special education costs

An Interview with The Civic Caucus

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Present

Dave Broden, Dennis Carlson, Mary Clarkson, Pat Davies, Paul Gilje (coordinator), Randy Johnson, Sallie Kemper, Dan Loritz (chair), Dana Schroeder, Clarence Shallbetter. By phone: Audrey Clay, Janis Clay, Tim McDonald.

Summary

Anoka-Hennepin School District Superintendent Dennis Carlson and district Director of Special Education Mary Clarkson make the point repeatedly in the discussion that the real problem in funding is not the cost to the district of special education, but the chronic underfunding of general education. According to Carlson, $100 million of the district's $400 million budget goes to special education. About 12 percent of the district's 39,000 students receive special education services. In order to supplement funding from the state and federal governments, the district must draw $31 million a year from its general education fund to pay the full costs of special education. If the state and local governments would cover that cross subsidy, Anoka-Hennepin could hire 500 more teachers, which would cut class sizes and serve all students better. Carlson points out that serving special education students often costs far more than the revenue the students bring into the district. Clarkson reports that currently there are more students receiving services for autism than for learning disabilities, a turnaround from seven years ago. She says that school districts now bear the responsibility of educating students with intense needs, who might have been institutionalized in the past. She would

reduce paperwork in special education by reducing the number of individualized education plans (IEPs) by 70 to 80 percent, focusing rather on program growth for all students. Carlson concludes by saying that school districts are in the business of "tough love," trying to balance underfunding with the expectations of parents.

Introduction

Dennis Carlson is superintendent of the Anoka-Hennepin School District, ISD 11, the largest school district in Minnesota, with an enrollment of 39,000 students. He began his career as an art teacher in Mercer (WI) Common School District. He spent one year as recreation supervisor at a youth center in Kenosha, WI, and then became a community education director, serving in the Glencoe and Elk River school districts and at Anoka-Hennepin, beginning in 1986. He held that position until 2003, when he was appointed assistant to the superintendent, and, finally, superintendent in 2008.

He has held many leadership positions, serving on the Minnesota Community Education Association board for five years, including a year as president. He was co-chair of the National Council of State Community Education Associations and served on the board of the National Community Education Association. He was also co-chair of the membership committee of the Minnesota Association of School Administrators and regional chair of the legislative committee for Schools for Equity in Education. In addition, he served as the president's appointee on the Minnesota School Public Relations Association Board of Directors and won that organization's District Leadership in Communication Award.

Carlson also earned numerous awards from the Minnesota Community Education Association, including its President's Award in 1983, Director of the Year Award in 1985, and Lifetime Achievement Award in 2003. He also earned the National Community Education Association's Special Service Award in 1985, as well as the organization's Outstanding Contribution to State Legislation Award in 2002.

He earned a B.A. degree from the University of Minnesota in 1969 and an M.A. degree in Community Education from Mankato State University.

Mary Clarkson is director of special education in the Anoka-Hennepin School District, a position she has held since September 2008. She is responsible for the district's special education programs and services for children and young adults from birth to age 21. She oversees a district special education budget of $75 million.

From 2005 through September 2008, Clarkson served as special education coordinator in the Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan School District (ISD 196). She coordinated and supported special education programming in eight K-12 schools. She was a special education consultant for the Blaine Cluster in the Anoka-Hennepin district from 2001 to 2005, where she supported special education staff in 13 K-12 schools. She started her career in 1996 as special education lead teacher at Centennial High School in Circle Pines, serving in the self-contained emotional and behavior disorder (EBD) program and Alternative Learning Center. From 1999 to 2001, she was a special education teacher at Century Junior High School in Lakeville.

Clarkson has served on the board of the Minnesota Administrators of Special Education (MASE) and won its 2013 New Special Education Leader Award. She has been Regional Directors Committee Chair for MASE. She has been an adjunct instructor at St. Cloud State University and Minnesota State University, Mankato.

She received her B.S. degree from St. Cloud State University in 1996; her Master's degree in special education and learning disabilities from Minnesota State University, Mankato, in 2004; her Director of Special Education credentials in 2005 and her Doctorate in Educational Administration and Leadership in 2013, both from St. Cloud State University.

Discussion

Anoka-Hennepin School District (ISD 11) is the largest school district in Minnesota.
According to Superintendent Dennis Carlson, the district serves 13 suburban communities spread out over 172 square miles north of Minneapolis and St. Paul. It operates 24 elementary schools, six middle schools (grades six through eight) and five high schools, plus alternative middle and high school sites. Its enrollment is 39,000 students, one-third of them living in poverty and one-fourth of them students of color. The district's five high schools range in size from 1,700 to 3,000 students. Among adults living in the district, Anoka-Hennepin has the lowest number of four-year college graduates in the metro area. It is located in the Sixth Congressional District and, according to Carlson, one-third of the residents are Democrats, one-third Republicans and one-third independents, who move either way. "It's been a politically charged school district," he said.

$100 million of Anoka-Hennepin's $400 million budget is for special education.
Carlson said about 12 percent of the district's 39,000 students receive special education services. That's about the state average. Mary Clarkson, the district's director of special education, said Anoka-Hennepin gets $7 million in federal funds for special education. That will be lower with the sequestration, she said.

Paying for the unfunded portion of special education draws $31 million a year from the district's general fund.
Carlson said the district's cross subsidy for special education-the amount of money the district must draw from its general fund to pay for special education-is $31 million a year. "The state and federal government underfund us $31 million a year for special education," he said. "Since special education's inception in 1974, the federal government has never funded to the level of what they agreed to, which is about 40 percent of special education expenditures," Clarkson said. "We're not even in that ballpark."

Chronic underfunding of general education is the real issue.
The special education cross subsidy is not the issue, Carlson said. "The chronic underfunding of regular education is the issue. We've gotten one-half of the inflationary amount for the last 10 years." He said the district needs $36 million in increased funding every biennium: $12 million for inflation each year and a base increase of $12 million for the second year. These inflationary increases include 2.5 percent increases in salaries and 0.5 percent for employee benefits. The main cost of education is in personnel (80 percent), which includes a teachers' contract with annual increases in step and lane

movement and insurance costs that total 3 percent each year. "If we only get $18 million from this legislative session, we'll have to cut $15 million to $18 million again," Carlson said. "With some of the largest class sizes in the state, I don't know where we're going to get that. It'll be a brutal cut."

It's hard to cut special education costs.
An interviewer asked how the district can reduce spending, if special education is such a large part of the budget. Clarkson responded, "It's really hard to cut special education costs for multiple reasons." One is the federal maintenance-of-effort requirement, where a district can't spend less than the year before for special education. In the Anoka-Hennepin district, the increases in staff salaries alone bring the costs up, so the district never worries about the maintenance-of-effort requirement.

"The students come to us and we're obligated by law to serve them," Clarkson said. "We can be as conservative as possible on the types of services we provide, but that's the one area that has federal mandates that say you have to assure that students with disabilities get a free, appropriate public education."

"Special education was developed out of litigation," she said. "It's steeped in litigation. That's how that whole system works a lot of times." "We're almost without fail always in litigation of some sort," Carlson added. "Or under the threat of litigation."

Evaluation of which children qualify for special education is a lengthy process.
In response to an interviewer's question about the process for identifying and evaluating children for special education, Clarkson said districts are required to have a "child find" process through which they identify students with disabilities. There is a lengthy assessment process and in Minnesota there are 13 different areas with very specific criteria for which students could qualify for special education services. A multidisciplinary team does the evaluation. She estimates that each initial evaluation takes 30 to 40 hours to complete.

The goal of special education is to keep the student with his or her mainstream peers as much as possible.
If a student is deemed eligible for special education, a team comes together and writes goals for services and what type of services the student needs. Most special education students are mainstreamed for the majority of the day. She said the most intense children make up only two percent of the special education students in the district. Kids with more significant needs may be educated in a center-based environment with other students with similar disabilities.

Schools now have the responsibility to educate children who might have been institutionalized in the past.
She noted that years ago, children with disabilities were institutionalized, because the education system bore no responsibility for them. "That needed to be changed," she said. "This was the right thing to do. All the individuals who were institutionalized are now in our educational system. You have *the* most intense-need children in your school systems. And those students have to have their needs met, regardless of what kind of need."

In response to a question about funding when those with special needs were institutionalized, Clarkson said, "Schools are the one guarantee for children. That's a huge honor for school districts and it's a huge responsibility. But it has to be paid for."

Some children have full-time nurses with them; some children have multiple adults with them at all times. "These are expenses that absolutely have to be covered somewhere," Clarkson said.

Serving special education students often costs far more than the revenue the students bring into the district.
Carlson said that in special education, there are kids who are one-to-one, perhaps with a paraprofessional and part of a teacher's time. That would be a $30,000 to $60,000 expense for a student who is bringing in $10,000 in revenue. Sometimes there are three adults to one student, who, again, is bringing in $10,000 in revenue to cover a $90,000 expense. Clarkson added that the district gets about a 50 percent reimbursement for special education staff.

Without the special education cross subsidy, the district could hire 500 more teachers .
Generally, over the district, the ratio of staff to students is 1 to 30, Carlson reported. The district has 2,700 teachers. If the state and local governments covered the $31 million the district now pays in a cross-subsidy, the district could hire 500 more teachers. "That would dramatically reduce class sizes," he said.

"Our obligation is to serve every student who walks through the door," Clarkson added. "If we got $31 million more and could hire 500 more teachers, that's going to benefit *all* children. This isn't a special education funding problem; it's a general education funding problem. The system is stressed to the point where it just can't take it anymore."

"If we had 500 more teachers, the benefits to all of our students-most importantly, our students with disabilities who are in the classrooms-would be phenomenal," Clarkson said. "The special education students would get better service."

Carlson gave an example of a regular high school classroom that has enrollment in the high 30s. If one or two special education students are mainstreamed in the class, parents will often say that the special education students are noisy and disruptive and are hurting the education of the other 38 students. "That's where the cross-subsidy hurts us, because the class sizes should be lower anyway," he said. "That's where the underfunding really hurts us."

It's not clear that anyone in the state is analyzing the total investment in special education students from multiple sources.
An interviewer asked who in the state is looking at the total investment in special education students: health care, mental health, social services and education. Clarkson said she doesn't know if anyone has looked into that.

"We know what happens when we don't invest early," she said. "Early intervention is going to make a huge difference for kids who don't come to school with the same advantages that typical students come with."

There should be a balance between mainstreaming and having distinct programs for kids with special needs.
An interviewer asked if there is some other method of instruction that might work with special education students. Clarkson noted that when special education started, the students would leave the regular classroom and have special instruction elsewhere. Research showed a growing gap between

"pullout" special education students and those who were mainstreamed. "So we swung the other way to try to get kids in mainstream classrooms," she said. "In my opinion, there has to be a balance."

"Some students need something different, much more practical and hands-on," Clarkson continued. "It has to be practical, career-development skills. Some of our students do not have the desire to go on to postsecondary education. We should concentrate on making them contributing members of society."

Anoka-Hennepin has a net loss of students through open enrollment, but generally attracts more special education students from other districts .
In response to a question, Carlson said his district loses a net of nearly 2,500 students through open enrollment. Parents can shop for the best special education services. "We generally attract more special education students," Carlson said. "We have a very good special education program."

The IEP can modify learning expectations for special education students .
An interviewer asked whether students in the 13 categories of special education have differing standards for what they're supposed to learn. Clarkson responded that the standard for learning is the same for all students. "But the IEP can modify expectations specific to a particular student," she said. "Students with significant cognitive disabilities will go on to some supportive-living arrangement. For special education students who are mainstreamed, we ask teachers to make modifications. Instead of learning all 10 things other students may be expected to learn, maybe they'll learn the three most important topics and standards. It's good to keep them in the mainstream classroom, because that's where the teachers who are content-specialists are."

Anoka-Hennepin's special education population is changing .
Clarkson reported that seven years ago, the district's special education program served 1,600 students with learning disabilities and 600 with autism. Now there are more students receiving services for autism than for learning disabilities. The number of students in the program with autism went up 550 percent over the last 10 years. "Our special education and general education teachers have to learn a whole new way of doing things," she said.

The district cannot afford to do much research on different ways of doing things.
An interviewer asked how the district builds in an effort to be experimenting with different ways of doing things. Carlson said Anoka-Hennepin is a very efficient district, with only three percent administrative costs. "We can't give much to research and development," he said. "I don't know where to find money for it other than through business partnerships." He described partnerships between the district and various companies to work on technology, website design and marketing the district.

Clarkson added that special education has had a really successful experiment with technology: some children with autism have used iPads successfully.

Early learning, early college, technology-assisted learning and redesign of the paperwork system could make special education more effective.
An interviewer asked about the top redesign structural and process changes in special education that could make it more effective. Carlson responded with three: (1) early education; (2) early college for

all students, so that they would have two years of college credit as they graduate; and (3) technology-assisted learning. "There are some kids who haven't fared well in school who'd rather work with computers than with a human being," he said.

Clarkson added that the paperwork system at both the state and federal levels must be redesigned. The majority of parents don't understand it, she said. "Because the special education system was built on litigation, you have a system where most of the time is spent on dotting i's and crossing t's. The mandated paperwork is intense."

"We really need to look at program growth for all students, rather than IEPs," she continued. "It would save time, money and stress and benefit the whole system. I would use IEPs only for the most intensive students, which would cut 70 percent to 80 percent of IEPs. I would not cut the funding, because then you could have flexibility on how you use your staff. Without flexibility of funding, it's hard to maximize outcomes for kids." She said then the district could better serve some students who are also at risk, but don't fit into any of the special education categories.

Carlson commented, "We are bogged down with process. Let's get outcome and results focused. The government is burying us with unfunded mandates. They're making political decisions. I don't need a political decision; as superintendent, I need a practical answer."

There are many barriers to successfully melding grades 11 to 14.
"We graduate 3,000 students every year," he said. "Ten percent of those are through community education, getting a GED, or high school diploma equivalent. One thousand of the 3,000 graduates go to college and do very well; 1,000 do not go to college; and there are 1,000 in the middle that somebody's got to have a plan for. But higher education doesn't have a plan. We must have a sense of urgency about this."

The early 1970s were the best time for education in Minnesota.
In response to a question, Carlson said the best time for education was at the time of the "Minnesota miracle" in the early 1970s, when the state said it would pay for education. "If I could do one thing, I'd leave education to the professionals, not to the politicians," he commented. "Politicians make public policy and don't do a computer run to see how it affects your local districts. This state does not fund the average school district adequately. It funds either the wealthy or poor districts or districts with high concentrations of poverty or kids of color."

Prioritize all-day kindergarten for funding over preschool education.
"Kindergarten is a great equalizer if we have all-day, every-day kindergarten," he said. "We must have something like that in the system."

Conclusion

"We're in the business of tough love in education," Carlson concluded. "It's a compromise between not enough funding and parents with demands through the roof. The more we can negotiate with parents about what you want this kid to be, the better off we'll be. And we'll do the best job we can."