

Open Letter to Jill Biden on Special Education Reform

The research is clear: early intervention and specialized instruction significantly improve outcomes.

PUTNEY, VT, UNITED STATES, March 1, 2021 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Dear Jill Biden Ph.D.

Speaking as someone who has worked in Special Education for 30 years and the publisher of a leading neurodiversity journal— please take up the crusade to fundamentally reform Special Education law. The legal paradigm of "Individuals With Disabilities" is failed. Modern neuroscience suggests the minority neurological subtypes—Dyslexia, ADHD, ASD—are only “disabilities” in the context of a school system that privileges neurotypical learners.

The research is clear: early intervention and specialized instruction significantly improve outcomes. Despite this, the current legal structure requires families with neurological minority traits to fight a system designed primarily to deny services and pathologize behavior. Rather than applying the science, Special Ed amounts to twelve years of humiliation and failure, throwing children into the world without the needed tools or credentials. The damage inflicted by these structural failures is measurable throughout society.

Despite spending twice as much per student, the outcomes for targeted children are terrible. It's not just acquisition of academic skills and drop out rates, both of which are well-documented statistics. Higher rates of psychiatric disorders are linked to reading disability (Hendren, Haft, Black, White, & Hoefft, 2018), autism (Hollocks, Lerh, Magiati, Meiser- Stedman, & Brugha, 2018), and ADHD (Katzman, Bilkey, Chokkaa, Falu, & Klassman, 2017). The research shows one's experience in school, not inherent neurology, produces these mental health issues (Mulvany, 2000). Once you accept that divergent learners are not disabled, the inclusion model begins to look unusually cruel.

Furthermore, the SPED fallacy permeates the culture. Neurotypical students resent the inclusion model (Bates, McCafferty, Quayle, McKenzie, 2015), believing it is legitimate to exclude divergent students from classroom activities that will be graded (Bottema-Beutel, Kim, & Miele, 2018). Students with autism are bullied at a significantly higher rate (Maiano, Normand, Salvas, Moullec, & Aime, 2016). Girls with ADHD experience more social challenges than neurotypical girls (Kok, Groen, Fuermaier, & Tucha, 2016). In general, people with ADHD will experience a negative stigma across their lifespan (Lebowitz, 2013). Incidentally, the Bureau of Justice reports 40% of the incarcerated population were previously diagnosed. Taken all together it becomes clear: the

paradigm of Special Education has failed. We are damaging between 14% and 30% of our children at significant cost to society.

Imagine if we aligned our laws with the science. Rather than pathologically targeting minority families on an individual basis—"Individuals with Disabilities"—we could design a system that recognizes that at least 20% of students will need a different approach.

Five simple reforms to significantly improve student learning experiences and outcomes while cutting the price tag:

1. Neurodiversity: Like cultural diversity, neurodiversity should be respected and valued for what it can offer the human species overall. Children must learn from the first day to celebrate neurological differences and recognize each of our strengths.
2. Teacher training: Require an understanding of neurodiversity as part of teacher training. Teachers, especially in the early grades, should recognize different neurological profiles and work to ensure that their needs are met.
3. Lower barriers to instruction: In my experience, most special ed money is spent either blocking people from getting services or providing band-aids for the people who didn't get the services they needed.
4. Universal Design: Follow Universal Design principles so all students can experience success from the start. Rather than perpetuating systems that privilege the neurotypical "norm," Universal Design seeks to create a context, accessible to students regardless of profile.
5. End Mainstreaming: Classes should be organized by skill level not age. We know that 14% to 30% of the population needs different interventions. Let children with minority learning profiles actually receive appropriate instruction.

So I implore you Dr. Biden: convene a task force to review special education law through the lens of neurodiversity. The "SPED" paradigm has failed. It didn't work when my parents were fighting the school system 50 years ago, and it continues to fail today. How many more generations must we damage?

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