

Special Ed Squeeze

Orthopedic Preschool hit by budget re-distribution.

Spirits at the Lane Regional Preschool for Orthopedically Impaired (OI) Children's June graduation were dampened by the knowledge of the school's closure. Students will have the option to move this fall to a different building, without daily contact with the typically developing peers that have defined their experience. Until now, OI children with walkers and wheelchairs have worked every day right alongside typically developing children. "The school has been a melting pot," says OI Preschool parent Carina Cooper.

The new program will also provide specialists in a consulting capacity only, putting an end to the model in which occupational and physical therapists work continuously with children throughout their day.

"For many years," says Sue Mathisen, director of special education for Lane ESD, "EC Cares has sub-contracted with 4J to operate the OI Preschool, and therefore, all of the staff were 4J employees. The service delivery model that 4J implemented was one in which an OT [occupational therapist] and a PT [physical therapist] provided direct services throughout the day. This was a rich service delivery model, relative to others, and one that has been unique to Lane County for many years. A couple of other similarly structured programs in other parts of the state were disbanded many years ago, due to the high cost of operating them."

One option for some OI students may be

mainstreaming into a class for typically developing children. But this is not possible for parents of children with multiple and life-threatening disabilities.

The decision to close the Orthopedic Preschool, which has been in existence in various guises for 35 years, rests with the Lane Regional Program, a subcontractor for 4J, which receives state funds from the Oregon Department of Education through Lane ESD. Each year, the Lane Regional Program has struggled to find space and money for the OI program. Says Lane Regional's Diane Howard, "We've done the best we can with what we have."

Nancy Latini, with the Oregon Department of Education, says, "The funds for Regional Programs are allocated based on the numbers of students served by disability as a percentage statewide. There are five disabilities that meet the regional requirements: autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), blind/vision impaired, deaf or hard of hearing, deaf/blind, and severe orthopedic impairment."

The story of the school's "re-administration" is multi-faceted. The number of children diagnosed with ASD has been rising dramatically, while state money for all kids with disabilities remains unchanged. The three "urban" Lane County districts — 4J, Springfield and Bethel — felt that with their resources they could improve the programming for kids with ASD offered by Regional Programs, and so broke ranks with Regional

Programs, taking these kids on themselves. In doing so, the districts received state funds for ASD, and the budget for kids with disabilities who remained with Regional Programs decreased proportionately.

"Lane County had a precipitous drop in students enrolled in the ASD program — from 420 in December 2002 to 212 in 2004," notes Mathisen. "Our percentage of the statewide [education budget] is proportionately lower, due to the drop in ASD enrollment."

Although the per-child budget for Regional Programs stayed the same, the kids who remain, students with ASD in harder-to-reach non-urban areas, and the visually, hearing and orthopedically impaired, cost more to serve.

"Some of the most expensive kids to serve are in the programs for visually and hearing impaired. But the stakes are higher for all kids. ASD, OI, vision, hearing, because they're all being served with fewer funds," Howard says.

Howard says that her goal throughout districtwide re-structuring is to "keep people." Most of the current OI teachers and therapists were offered new positions in the district, though with varied salaries and benefits.

The OI Preschool is not a scapegoat, Howard says, but a harbinger of more severe budget tightening in special education. Current federal funding for special education programs is at 17 percent, with the state making up the difference. Howard says that with anticipated retirements in the vision and hearing impaired programs next year, exiting staff will not be replaced.

This fall, some OI parents will enroll their children in the new classroom designed and administered by the UO's early intervention program, EC Cares, in the old Whiteaker School. EC Cares Co-Director Judy Newman is optimistic. "We have a long history of serving kids with all kinds of disabilities, including children with orthopedic impairments," she says. "I feel like the families will be in good hands."

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Programs for disabled children were created to ensure that people of all abilities have equal access to public education. But the closure of the OI Preschool, and its subsequent "re-administration," is a reminder that the nature of that access is subject to federal and state budgetary constraints and the hazards of bureaucracy.

Debbi Farr, state representative for District 14 and a member of the state's Education Policy Committee, reflects on the OI Preschool closure. "Change is difficult," she says. "It's hard on parents and it's hard on kids. We want to provide the best possible programs in the most cost effective way."

This article was researched with the help of John Shin.

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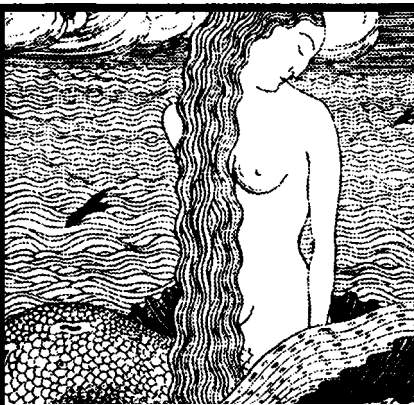
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